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DESPERATE DUKE, THE GUADALOUPE "GALOOT;" Or, The Angel of the Alamo City.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DECK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC., ETC.



THE BLACK STEED OF DESPERATE DUKE DASHED INTO THE BAR-ROOM ONLY TO BEHOLD IN THE LARGE MIRROR OLD ROCKY CROUCHING LIKE A PANTHER FOR A SPRING.

Desperate Duke,

The Guadalupe "Galoot;"

OR,

The Angel of the Alamo City.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

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AUTHOR OF "THE BRAZOS TIGERS," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," "KIT CARSON, JR.," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DASTARD DEED AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

"I'm er plain corn-fed human, an' doesn't often splosh over inter luxuries; but I'm incinerated ter think that I kin crawl outside of 'bout four fingers o' soothin' syrup without gittin' airey, er spooney, er slam 'tall hyderphobic ter-day. Shove her out, George, strait es a 'Colt' kin shute!"

"Dare you vos, Auld Rogky, and dot vos coot visky. No trug sdore schlops vos mix mit dot; but I vil dake mein avertafy it vos cum from Auld Gentuck."

"Thanky, George! I reckon ye're puttin' hit squar', fer I never know'd yer ter give ther old man any liquid what 'ud knock him off'n ther trail, without I made a hog o' myself. Sometimes I'm so dog-goned sot back 'bout somethin' er 'nother, that I disremembers how much I kin chamber."

"Thet hev gut ther bead on hit, an' lookssolid pure simon. Dog-goned ef hit doesn't smell solid! Kinder slide out a tumbler fer yerself, George; fer I can't pour down my exelerate erlone. Ef I should, hit 'ud go ther wrong way, an' choke me 'bout off ther trail."

"Pilgrims 'pears ter be ormitry skeerce jist 'bout now, hit looks like?"

"All right! I smiles mit you, Rogky. Dot Duke, from der Guadalupe, vos on von stompede, und he dakes all der poys in der Blaza House to ead supper mit him."

The man addressed seemed somewhat surprised, but he had evidently waited as long as his thirst would allow for the slow, phlegmatic German to prepare his drink. So, clicking glasses, he poured down his whisky at a single gulp, and then rubbing his sleeve across his bearded mouth, he questioned hurriedly:

"Yer doesn't go fur ter say thet Duke Dudley air in town?"

"Vell, you can cample dot he vos right in dot purg. He vos right on dot blaza 'pout one hour bast, und alretty he vos schake hands mit dot Jarles Heidseick vife six dimes. I dink he gits juck full 'fore I shuts up dot par."

"I doesn't tumble ter thet gerloot's name what yer mentions. Don't reckon I ever war interducted ter him. Air he a States cuss?"

George Lingsweider, the bar-keeper, embraced his corpulent front, and laughed most heartily, his heavy eyes twinkling comically as he explained:

"It vos dot champagne vot I means. Dot Jarles Heidseick schampagne, auld bard, vot I dinks dot Duke gits juck full mit Vrench vine!"

"Oh, ho! Thet's hit, air hit? Wa-al, I never knowed much 'bout them XXX 'ristercratic liquids. Straight whisk' air 'bout my size, an' thet what yer hes shoved out, George, war prime, dead sure an' sartin. 'Bout how len'thy a period since Duke levanted out'n this arter his feed?"

"'Pout half hour, I vos reckon; und he dakes everypotty, pummers und all, 'long mit him. Have you yust sdrike dot purg dis minit, bard?"

"Ya-as, jist 'roved! Jist struck San Antone."

"From vare you comes dot dimes?"

"Bin over towards Eagle Pass."

"Dem Creasers on dot rampage?"

"Ya-as; yallers an' reds air both kinder bilious atween ther Frio an' Bravo. Thar's a hefty spatterin' on 'em, an' right smart show fer he-ole fun in ther slashin' an' shootin' line. Ef any human thinks he kin play a lone hand on ther trail toward old Mex', he'll git so dog-goned bad fooled thet hit'll make his head swim. Thet air, 'fore he gits hit skinned!"

"Dot vos tangerous dravelin' in does shap-erelles mit yourself, eh?"

"Thet's 'bout ther way ter put hit, though hit ain't 'zactly squar' 'Nited States. Yer tongue air a leetle too big fer yer mouth, George, an' yer talk es though yer spit out yer lingo plum' ag'in' a double-barreled 'norther,' an' ther words gits mixed up 'fore they gits ter a pilgrim's years."

The last speaker, Old Rocky, so called from having passed much of his eventful life in the Rocky Mountains previous to establishing himself in Texas as a ranger and scout, was a man of medium hight, spare frame, and with a face that was much wrinkled; more, however, from privation and hardship than from age.

His hair was long and sprinkled with gray, as was also his beard. His lips were thin, nose sharp, brows projecting, and eyes piercing and bright as those of an eagle.

His small hands were never at rest; his fingers

working even when his body was as motionless as a stone statue, seeming not only ready at all times to grasp a weapon from his belt, but eager to do so.

His face and neck were much tanned from exposure, his hands were much scarred, and the track of a bullet was plainly to be seen near his cheek-bone, the same leaden ball having evidently clipped off the upper lobe of his ear.

A rough, blue woolen shirt, open at the neck, a pair of buckskin breeches, slashed and trimmed with soiled and torn fringes, and thrust into cow-hide boots, to the heels of which were buckled long-roweled Mexican spurs, made up his prairie costume. A black, slouched, wide-brimmed sombrero, which also showed hard service, was pushed back carelessly upon his head, displaying a forehead that marked no mean intellect, and that was strikingly white compared with the lower part of the face, from its being shaded from the sun.

Hanging from a loose belt was an old-fashioned Colt's revolver of the heaviest caliber, while a huge bowie-knife nestled closely to it, as if claiming a near "pard-ship" in bloody business. Both of these arms seemed much too heavy for the wearer to use with that quickness and dexterity which close quarters calls for.

But a closer inspection of the old scout would change that opinion, for he is a man of iron frame, with sinews of steel, and lightning-like in movement, as he whirls half about and walks the length of the bar, standing opposite a magnificent French mirror that extends from within three feet of the floor to the ceiling.

The room in which we introduce Old Rocky to the reader is the Plaza Bar, situated on the Main Plaza in San Antonio de Bexar, Texas, and located near the northeast corner of the square.

There were two large, high doors leading from the Plaza into the bar; and, entering by either of which, you would find the long, heavy mahogany counter of fine workmanship to your left, and occupying the whole length of the room.

Behind the bar was another large and costly mirror, and on either side were highly ornamented shelves, upon which were tastily arranged glasses of every size and color, interspersed with cut-glass decanters filled with various liquors.

The mirror in front of which Old Rocky stood inspecting himself, which he had not probably done before for many months, was directly in front of the entrances. In the right hand back corner of the bar were three steps leading up to the door to a short corridor, and into a large billiard room—the largest and finest in Western Texas at the time of which we write, which was just previous to the Civil War.

Colonel Charles Pyron, the best pistol-shot in Bexar county, and who in after years was in the Confederate army, was the owner of this establishment, which had no connection with the Plaza House; the latter being then "run" by a man named Smith, formerly of New Braunfels, on the Guadalupe.

Charles Pyron, while a colonel in Sibley's Brigade, C. S. A., at the battle of Val Verde, New Mexico, had three horses shot under him: a most terrible fight, in which were engaged one hundred Texans who had no arms except the blades of bowie-knives set into the end of a lance, and with which they charged into the Boys in Blue—charged, only to fall, almost to a man, riddled with bullets!

Van Wells, the tall, lank, Yankee-like individual who had charge of the billiard-room for years, and who was married to a Mexican woman, was assassinated by a Rio Grande Greaser, while returning one night to his home, a few years since.

Van was a warm friend, a true pard, and one of the noblest of men.

George Lingsweider, who is already before us, a short, thick-set, good-natured German, was for a long time bar-keeper at this well-known resort; and there are others who could tell, were they now living, of many comic, and many more tragic and bloody scenes which were here enacted in their presence, men of all nationalities, garb, and character taking part in them.

As one entered the bar, by the first door from the Plaza House, a green Venetian screen, in front of him, hid the counter, and those who might be near it, from view. Passing around it, he would find a door from the right hand side of the billiard-room, leading into the side street nearly opposite Masonic Hall, and below which, on the same street, was the Government Hospital.

San Antonio had but twelve thousand population when the scenes occurred which we propose to recount, and two-thirds of these were Mexicans, Mestizoes, or Castilians; the remainder being Americans, Germans, French, and a sprinkling of Jews.

But, to return to our narrative.

"Vot you does mit dose class, Auld Rogky? You petter gombs your hair und viskers, und den co und see dot leetle cal vot you guts. Don't look so sharup, or you preaks dot, und den dar gomes der pig moneys from your bockets. Vot you dinks?"

George was slowly and placidly polishing a tumbler, at times rolling his small eyes in the direction of the old scout, as the latter drew his beard through his hands, at the same time contemplating his reflection with much apparent disgust.

"Dog-gone yer lookin'-glass!" said Old Rocky, petulantly. "Hit's stuck up hyer fer folks ter gaze inter, I reckon; an' es I hain't see'd my beautiful pictur' fer some moons I thought I'd take a peep. I'm a-growin' old putty fast, George—dang'd ef I ain't!"

"Yaw! I vos dinks dot meinself. Vot for you goes so mooch mit dem berraries und shap-eralls? Vy you not schtop mit me, und trinks lager pier? Den you gits pig as you never vos!"

"Dang my half-sister's black cat, ef I'd stay in civerlize one moon, ef yer'd gi'n me ther hull o' San Antone! Yer'd hev ter plant me on Powder House Hill inside o' two weeks. I'd either swell up an' bu'st, er wilt inter my butes."

"Hal-lo! What's ther rumpus? Reckon I'll glide under ther eend o' ther bar, an' lay low. George, slide me another whisk', on ther sly. None o' ther boyees knows I'm in ther burg, an' yer needn't blow yer bugle on that subjeck."

"Dot vos all right, Auld Rogky. I says not-ings. Geep gool, und shtop vere you vos!"

The bar counter did not extend close up to the wall at the rear of the room, as there were two feet between it and the partition, left for the accommodation of the bar-keeper, when he wished to step out and across into the billiard-room. In this passage the old scout now crouched.

Outside on the Plaza was a most unearthly din, caused by the mixed crowd that came pouring out of the Plaza House; consisting of stage-drivers, mule-whackers, rancheros, loafers, and gamblers, and all led by a tall, symmetrically formed man, dressed in a blue black velvet suit, and wide-brimmed white sombrero.

He carried about his waist a richly-embroidered belt, with silver clasp, which held a pair of silver-mounted Colt's revolvers, and a bowie-knife, the handle of which appeared to be of solid gold.

This man's face had been very handsome. This could be readily seen. But now it was bloated by dissipation, and his eyes were wandering in their glances, seemingly suspicious of danger; having a guilty look, and one which also indicated a treacherous character.

Long black hair, a goatee and mustache of the same color, his eyes being also black, and too small compared with his other features—this made up the picture of the man. The man was Duke Dudley.

Yes; it was he of whom George Lingsweider had spoken to Old Rocky, and he was a bad citizen, one who would long since have been hanged, had it not been for his great wealth. He owned one hundred slaves, who were on his plantation on the Colorado, and also a fine stock ranch on the Guadalupe River, some forty miles from San Antonio.

Liberal to a fault, and sparing no expense to gratify his tastes and passions, he was indeed rightly held to be a dangerous man.

As we have mentioned, Duke Dudley was in the lead of the motley crowd, which he had just been feasting at the Plaza House; but he soon came to a stop in his walk, at a distance of some thirty feet from the veranda of the hotel, he being on the Plaza.

Without noticing the noisy horde that followed him, Duke's eyes became fixed upon the form of a young and graceful girl of perhaps fifteen.

Thus she seemed at a little distance; a rebosa of brilliant colors being wound about her head, which prevented her features from being more than partially seen.

Enough, however, of her face was in view to show that she was white; evidently a Castilian girl, who was tripping lightly to the church on the west side of the Plaza to prayers.

Only for an instant was Duke Dudley's gaze fixed upon her. Then he bounded back to the veranda, to a post of which was secured a magnificent black horse.

Jerking his bowie-knife, Duke cut the lariat, sprang into the saddle, and shot toward the church.

The maiden, observing the horse galloping madly toward her, gave a scream, and ran to gain the shelter of the adobe wall; but before she reached the gateway, she was grasped by the young planter, who caught her up before him in the saddle, and spurred back at headlong speed.

Even the most depraved, among the crowd that had followed him, were astonished.

Many a Quixotic and even outrageous act had they known Duke to do, but this was most infamous; and yet no one attempted, by word or movement, to rescue the girl.

That Duke was half insane from drink, they all knew; but this was no excuse for such a coward act.

The rebosa fell from the head of the maiden, who now lay unconscious in the arms of the planter, disclosing a face of angelic beauty.

The consternation of the crowd was now doubled; for Duke whirled his horse, and went at a mad gallop into the Plaza Bar.

When Old Rocky concealed himself at the end of the counter, he thought only of giving a surprise to the boys when they should enter the room; but as matters turned out it was providential that he had so taken up his position.

Old Rocky was soon the surprised, in place of surprising others.

The black steed of Desperate Duke dashed into the bar room, only to behold in the large mirror, Old Rocky crouching like a panther for a spring.

George Lingsweider, gazed, open-mouthed; even his phlegmatic face showing his indignation, as he reached beneath the bar for his revolver.

But how about the old scout?

From the position of the latter, he could look upward, and take in the tableau in every detail.

Quick as a flash, Old Rocky bounded to the side of Duke, whose gaze was withdrawn from the mirror by the sound of the scout's boots upon the bar-room floor; but he was unable to catch sight of any one, before he was incapable of so doing.

With teeth set tight against his bowie-blade, and muscles strained to the utmost, his eyes flashing fury, Old Rocky sprung upward, gathered the long hair of Duke Dudley in his right hand, and the maiden in his left, jerking the young planter to the ground, his head striking the floor with terrible force, where he lay outstretched and senseless. The frightened horse darted wildly through the door, just as the yelling rabble poured in, many of them being knocked down and trampled upon beneath its hoofs.

Pale as death, with bowie in his right hand, and the beautiful Castilian girl hanging limp and senseless over his left arm—thus stood Old Rocky in the middle of the room; a most dangerous glitter in his eye, a defiance that promised death to the man who said aught in disapproval of his recent proceeding.

Up on the bar counter stood George Lingsweider, his fat face flushed, and he puffing like a porpoise from his unusual exertion in gaining such a position. His right hand held a Colt's revolver, cocked and leveled at the door, while he yelled, as he caught his breath:

"Stops vare you vos, Auld Rogky, und dake gare dot leedle cal! Der bilcrim vot shall say boo, Shorge vill fenterlate dot man's prains mit der bistol!"

CHAPTER II.

A CABALLERO'S FURY.

It was a most striking tableau in the Plaza Bar; the sounds that proceeded from the veranda being in consonance with the impressive and somewhat startling scene within.

Many good and true men were in the Plaza House, but they had not mingled with the crowd that followed Duke Dudley. These last was by this time so much under the influence of liquor as to render them incapable of judging the situation; besides this, they dreaded the idea of interfering with one who, in their opinion, bore a charmed life.

It was at the very time when the wagons of rancheros who had brought supplies for sale, or who had come to town to purchase, had gone into camp or down the San Antonio river; in fact, it was the lull in the day affairs of the Alamo City. In an hour more, and from then on to midnight, the streets, gambling houses, bar-rooms, and fandangoes would teem with tumult, and excited crowds. But, in consequence of the hour, the Plaza was now deserted.

Stop; we mistake. For from the southeast corner of the square, from the direction of French's block, a man is seen running in hot haste.

He is of slender stature, with black hair and eyes. His face is pale as death, and resembles strongly that of the young girl who had been so rudely treated by Duke Dudley. He is dressed in the costume of a Spanish-American caballero. His hair flies wildly, his head is bare, and in his hand is clutched a stiletto, long and pointed, and sharp as a needle.

His eyes are filled with that passionate fury which is only to be seen in one of Spanish blood, and his white teeth gleam between lips that curl upward and downward, drawn thus beast-like by the murderous madness that rules his brain.

On he comes, across the Plaza, and toward the Plaza Bar.

But, to return thither.

No sooner did George Lingsweider see that there was no danger from the hangers on of the young planter, than he rolled off the bar, and grasping a glass of water, began sprinkling the face of the fair girl, who still lay in the arms of the old scout.

Well knew Old Rocky the desperate character and skill in arms of Duke Dudley, who now lay before him, and he was on the alert to meet him upon recovery, with bowie or pistol.

Suddenly the beautiful Castilian revived, and struggled to her feet. One quick glance she gave at her surroundings, which at last rested upon the prostrate form of Duke Dudley.

With a shudder, she turned her eyes upon the old scout, recognizing him on the instant; and, by intuition, knowing that it was to him she was indebted for her rescue from the ruffian at her feet.

Her face beamed with a look that was almost one of adoration, as she cried out:

"Gracias, mil gracias, salvador mio!"

The embarrassment of Old Rocky was far beyond the power of words to describe; and George Lingsweider was forced to smile, as he muttered:

"Vel, py tam! I vish I vos a skow-at, an' not a tam Deutch par-keeper!"

At this moment the *caballero* rushed frantically into the room; and, with a cry of joy, the young girl, catching sight of him, threw herself into his arms. He stood defiant, as he clasped her firmly.

"Brother Carlos!" she said, with a grateful cry.

"Celesta! Santissima Maria! What has happened?"

The situation was easily interpreted.

"Diablo Americano!"

This was shot from between the teeth of the young man as his eyes became fixed upon the still unconscious Duke Dudley. In a moment, however, his fierce passion seemed to abate.

This was caused by Celesta, who pointed her jeweled finger significantly toward Old Rocky.

With quick stride, and still retaining the hand of his sister within his own, the Castilian reached the side of the old scout, extending his hand as he exclaimed, in a voice of deep thankfulness:

"Mil gracias, Senor Rocky! You have this day done me and mine a service that shall never be forgotten. Your name shall henceforth be sacred to us, and be mingled in our prayers."

"I doesn't want no thanks fer doin' my duty," was the reply; "an' hit hes done my hull 'natermy good ter lay out thet cantankerous cuss. I don't reckon I'm ther pilgrim ter stan' an' see ary galoot lay hands on a caliker-kivered human, 'specially ter kerral leetle Celesty Garcia. Hit's steel ter steel atween you an' him now, Carlos; an' I'm counted inter ther game. But jist now yer'd better take Celesty ter ther casa, 'fore thar's another rumpus."

"Thanks, my old friend, for reminding me of it," said Carlos. "I will do as you say, and then demand satisfaction from the cowardly miscreant who lies there. Let me beg of you, Senor Rocky, to retire, and not give the coward a chance to fight you. This must be settled by myself."

"Yer perposes ter fight ther cuss, then?"

"Caramba! Yes!"

Those of Duke Dudley's party who lingered on the Plaza now made way for the desperate-looking Castilian.

Although but few knew the full particulars, all, as they saw the beautiful girl being led across the Plaza by her brother—both of them being well known in the Alamo City—were confident that she had been grossly insulted, and that Carlos Garcia was not the man to allow the insult to go unavenged.

There is little doubt that Duke Dudley would have been lynched had he performed the outrage one half-hour later, but just now the crowd was made up very largely of the planter's followers.

Be it remembered, however, that it was only when in his cups that Duke would associate with the men whom he was ready to curse for a pack of deceptive cowards.

Far from being cowards, however, were many who answered his greetings with a social warmth, and clicked glasses with him at the bar; but simply men who sought no quarrel with any one, and yet were ready at the risk of their lives to defend a friend or to protect the weak.

When, from mouth to mouth, the state of affairs was circulated, a hush fell upon all. People moved in slow and cautious steps, listening each moment for the report of revolvers. And all this time Duke Dudley lay senseless where he had first fallen.

But he was liable to revive at any moment, and then, without doubt, the "ball" would commence.

The black horse of the planter—a blooded Kentucky racer—had been caught by one of Duke's party, who had secured the animal to a post of the veranda.

When the brother and sister left the bar, Lingsweider passed behind the counter, and, pouring out a glass of whisky, placed it on the end of the bar, saying:

"Rogky, my poy, yoost you trinks dot! Den you squats down vare you vos, behind dot par endt. Ven dot vellar vakes up, ve vill see what he makes. I dinks maybe he shtarts von leetle fandango mit himself."

"Wa-al," said the old scout, "I'll do as yer advise, but hit'll come nigh on ter salivatin' me ter lay low. I s'pose, though, hit berlongs ter Garcia ter l'arn ther condemned velvet-kivered kiote thet he can't run ther hull Lone Star State. Hit 'ud take fourteen hundred an' forty sich galoots ter git away wi' me—I'm putty dang'd sartin o' that!"

A low word of caution from George silenced

the scout, who crouched down in his former position, and remained silent, only the spurred boots of Duke Dudley being in view.

The sound of heavy steps on the pavement outside was now heard, and half a score of rangers, prairie men, and stage drivers entered the bar-room.

"What's ther difficult wi' Duke?" asked Jack Hodge, a fat and jolly stage-driver. "Is he foundered? Why don't yer unbuckle his harness, an' rub him down? Heerd thar war a rumpus 'bout a gal what war purty as a new coach. Wish't I'd 'a' bin hyer-a-ways!"

"Ef you had been mit me, Yack, dare woot haf been a bigger rumpus. Neffer you mindt. Geep shtill, und you vil see vot you vil see, ven dot Duke comes pack mit himself. I don't vos skared worth von pigayune."

As George spoke, the young planter rolled upon his side, and sat up, gazing about in a bewildered manner.

"What has been the racket this trip?" he asked. "Was I drunk that I fell off my horse? Reckon you doctored that champagne for me, didn't you, George?"

"Vot dot you say? You dinks I goes to Vrance, und shtiek some trugs in dot vine von dey pottles it? Dare vos von vot von calls cy-glonge, und you gits plowed in dis Baza par vrom de ow-et site."

A roar of laughter greeted Lingsweider's explanation. This incensed Duke Dudley more than he dared show, for he knew by the bar-keeper's manner that the latter was sniggering a volcano of indignation, which would burst forth against himself, did he leave an opening. Many dark looks, he now perceived to be shot at him, as he tried to recall the scene he had last been through.

In a moment it all came back to him.

He knew that he had committed an unpardonable offense. Had he done the cowardly deed under cover of darkness, and when no one observed him, it would have been far different. Now, however, the whole town would know of it before the following day, and he then would be in no enviable position.

Some one, he knew, must have jerked him from his horse and taken the young girl from him.

Who had done this? Where was Celesta Garcia?

One thing was certain. On that he was determined. The man who had humiliated him must fight.

Duke's head had struck the floor with great force, and his mind was only clear at times; for a moment relapsing into a bewildered state, during which his thoughts were in a disconnected muddle.

Suddenly springing to his feet, he strode to the counter. There grasping a bottle, Duke helped himself, and then started to walk across the room, a consciousness that he was in a dangerous position and that some one was now trying to "get the drop on him," ruling his disordered brain. As he thus cogitated, he caught a glimpse of the reflection of Old Rocky, in the side mirror, as the latter crouched, knife in hand, under the end of the bar.

Without stopping to reason that what he saw was only a reflection, the planter jerked his revolver and sent a bullet crashing through the mirror.

"Hunderd thousnd tuyvels!" burst from the lips of Lingsweider; while all hands turned on the instant to ascertain what had happened.

Duke Dudley stood, his weapon in his hand, utterly dumfounded at his own act, and disgusted with himself.

Just then Carlos Garcia rushed madly in at the door.

With the quickness of thought, the Castilian jerked the pistol from the hand and the bowie from the belt of the planter, and hurled them through the open door into the billiard-room. Then, drawing back his hand, he gave Duke a violent slap in the face that sounded through the room.

Never was man more thunderstruck than the young planter. His flushed and bloated face became pale as death, and all power of speech or motion seemed taken from him.

As quickly as Carlos Garcia had slapped the face of the man who had so basely insulted his sister, he backed quickly from the room, across the veranda, and then sprung upon a fiery half-breed horse that was held by one of his servants.

Whirling his horse, Carlos galloped into the middle of the Plaza, and then, facing the door of the bar room, he sat stiff in his saddle awaiting the appearance of the man whom he had sworn by all the saints to kill.

CHAPTER III.

A DESPERATE GAME.

TWENTY-FIVE years previous to the time when the incidents occurred which have been detailed, a steamboat was speeding down the Mississippi River under a full press of steam.

She was heavily loaded with cotton, besides having the usual complement of passengers. The time was midnight, but a full moon lit up the waters, and the cabins were one blaze of light, although nearly all the passengers had retired to their state-rooms.

About twenty gentlemen, however, remained, all gathered around a table at which sat two men engaged at cards. The spectators were principally wealthy planters, some few river gamblers being mingled among them.

For an hour or more the two men had been occupied with their game, one of them seeming to be favored by Dame Fortune to an astonishing degree.

"Major Dave Dudley, I shall see your bet and go you one thousand dollars better!"

Thus spoke the one who had been the unlucky man in the game, a tall, well-dressed, aristocratic-looking planter, with a massive gold chain about his neck and a large diamond glittering on the bosom of his shirt.

His hair and eyes were black, and vengeful passion was marked plainly in his face and manner.

His antagonist, in place of this, had a look of cunning, which was shown also in his delay in play and his close study of the cards.

"Colonel Will Wildom," returned his opponent, imitating the sarcastic pronunciation of the full name which he had given, "I shall see your thousand and go you ten thousand dollars better!"

The two men eyed each other in silence for a moment.

"Let me see," said the man addressed as Colonel Wildom, assuming an indifferent manner.

"Let me see. As you have already won my whole cotton crop and one hundred thousand in cash, I think it is about time my luck changed. Jim, give me another drink of brandy!"

The waiter quickly produced the liquor, which Colonel Wildom drank; then, with a face deathly pale, and which his opponent did not fail to notice and profit by, as it gave the lie to the words that followed, he said:

"Major, I said, and I repeat, that it is time my luck changed, and I have got the hand that will prove the time has really come. I shall see your ten thousand and raise you one hundred thousand, giving you a mortgage on my plantation and slaves, if I lose!"

Major Dudley did not hesitate a single moment.

"Colonel Wildom, I know my hand is worth the pot, and more; but, under the circumstances, I shall call you. Let me see your hand, or call it, and show up afterward."

The expression upon Wildom's face was now agonizing. He now felt sure that he was a ruined man. He had commenced to play on a small hand; in fact, he had tried to bluff his partner, which hand he was confident would not win, for he knew Major Dudley to be too cunning to risk the amount he had unless he had big cards.

All the world seemed suddenly to have turned against him, and he was now worse than penniless as soon as he should show his cards.

Ghastly and with livid circles around his eyes, while his nerves twitched as with St. Vitus's dance, Wildom allowed the cards to slide, face up, to the table.

"You have three kings, colonel. I can just lay over you, and that is all. Three aces in my hand, a jack and the other king. The pot is mine!"

As Major Dudley spoke he exposed his cards, and carelessly raked in the stakes, while he added:

"We can fix up the mortgage when we arrive at the Crescent City. We both stop at the St. Charles."

Colonel Wildom's brain was in a whirl. His black, piercing eyes glared with murderous fury, and he sprang erect, his tall form quivering as if stricken with palsy. Then, leaning over the table, he struck Major Dudley a ringing blow in the face, crying out, in a husky and unnatural voice:

"Dave Dudley, you are a coward, and worse than a thief! You have cheated me in this game all through!"

No sooner had he struck the blow than he jerked a long bowie from his bosom and stood with blazing eyes, his features contorted with murderous hate and rage. Instantly all was confusion.

Major Dudley and the chair upon which he sat had been hurled to the floor of the cabin by the force of the blow, and friends now hastened to assist him, while others endeavored in vain to pacify Colonel Wildom.

When the major regained his feet, his face was bleeding profusely; but he drew no weapon, and calmly stood, supported by two friends, glaring with amazement upon the infuriated colonel.

"Colonel Wildom," he said, at last, "I won your money fairly; and if you say I cheated you I say you are a liar! You have insulted me most grossly. I now challenge you to fight me at the next landing. I demand satisfaction for the cowardly insults you have put upon me thus publicly. The choice of weapons is yours. I wish no more words with you!"

"I shall speak, nevertheless!" broke out Wildom. "I repeat that you have ruined me and mine, through cheating; and, to prove it, I will ask any gentleman present if he ever knew a man to hold a card next in value higher than his partner, for twenty consecutive deals. It

is an impossibility, and I repeat that you are worse than a cheat! Yes; I will fight you to the death, and I choose pistols!"

The friends of the two men now prevailed upon each to go to his state room, and prepare for the proposed duello, it being known that the steamer would stop to wood-up a few miles down the river.

Seconds were chosen, and a surgeon being on board, he was awakened, and his services engaged.

A pair of French dueling-pistols were borrowed for the occasion from the clerk of the boat, and all who had witnessed the difficulty sat smoking and drinking quietly, sincerely regretting the affair, for both men were popular.

About half an hour after all had been prepared, the steamer pointed for the river bank, which was lined by a dark forest, a few rough woodmen's huts being all that indicated the presence of man.

Upon nearing the shore the gang-plank was run out, and the principals, with the friends of each, and the surgeon, were permitted to land.

Both men were now calmer than when they had parted in the cabin; but the face of Major Dudley was much swollen, and his eyes were flashing wildly.

The place chosen for the duel was clear of the shade cast by the trees; and the distance agreed upon, ten paces, was soon measured off. The men were then stationed, pistol in hand, the faces of both as pale as death, and the silvery moon shining placidly down upon the tragic scene.

The joyous song of a score of negroes, as they ran back and forth to the boat, "toting" wood, and the chaste, clear moonlight, were all that redeemed the weird scene from its aspect of diabolism.

No time was lost, for there was none to spare.

The seconds had attended to their duty, and the two men stood gazing into each other's faces, waiting for the word which soon came—the signal perhaps of death to one or both.

"One—two—three!"

At the last word, both pistols belched fire, the reports blending together, and echoing through the forest.

Major Dudley stood like a statue, as he lowered his arm.

The pistol dropped from the hand of Colonel Wildom, his tall form reeled like a lightning-stricken pine, and he fell upon the sward, his white shirt-front stained with gore.

All was now bustle and confusion.

Major Dudley was hurried on board, and taken at once to his state room.

The apparently dead body of Colonel Wildom was carefully carried up the gang plank, and to the cabin, where the surgeon proceeded to extract the bullet from the opposite side from which it had entered. He then dressed the wound, and administered proper restoratives.

"Will he live, doctor?" was the eager and anxious question that came from all sides.

"Probably he will, gentlemen, if the excitement of his brain can be controlled. It is, however, a question of time and good nursing. He is dangerously wounded."

Colonel Wildom opened his eyes, but the orbs were lusterless; the fire of madness, the flush of fury had vanished. His gaze seemed fixed upon one spot directly above him, on the cabin roof.

He was oblivious to all around him. Even the clang of the boat bell, a signal for drawing in the gang-plank, caused not a twitch of nerve, or a quiver of the eyelid.

Then, out upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi shot the steamer, with its sleeping human freight. Yes, and its watching human freight, as well!

For, pacing back and forth in his narrow state-room, tramping bundles of bank-notes beneath his feet, was Major Dave Dudley.

And, stretched upon the cabin floor, groping on the borders of death-land, was his recent friend, and more recent opponent, Colonel Will Wildom.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INSULT AND THE DUELLO.

CARLOS GARCIA, on his way home with his sister, had time to reflect upon the situation.

The protestations of Celesta against his returning to the Plaza were of no avail. He paid no attention to her, beyond conducting her to their home, and commanding her maid to attend her; for the brother and sister were orphans.

Ordering a servant to saddle his favorite horse, Carlos galloped back, as we have seen.

The spectators were astonished at the dash and dexterity displayed by the young Castilian. But it was a most singular and complicated case, and one with which no one could interfere in any way, shape, form, or manner.

Doubtless, had he not been interfered with, Duke Dudley would have dashed out of the city with his prize, who would have been added to his many victims from the lower walks of life.

Had he been a poor man, he would have been dragged unceremoniously from the bar-room floor, and hanged; for gold and rank command

a certain amount of respect, even in a frontier town.

As it was, there were men present, eager and ready to spill the blood of Duke Dudley, if there was an opening to justify them in so doing.

Old Rocky was, as well as many others, filled with great concern in regard to Carlos, who was the only near relative and protector of his sister; for not one had the remotest idea that the young Castilian would come out of the fight alive.

Duke had never yet missed killing his man at the first shot, and he had fought many regular and irregular duels. The only chance now was, that the audacity and dash of Carlos, with the feeling that the spectators were all against him, might cause the planter to be less confident and skillful than usual.

For a full minute after the *caballero* had left, Duke Dudley stood in his tracks, his lips tightly compressed. Then he sprang into the billiard-room, and regaining his revolver and bowie, ran from the bar, unloosed his horse, and bounded into the saddle.

Carlos Garcia sat his horse calmly, in front of him.

Just then a Mexican stepped hastily to the side of Duke's horse, and said, in the form of a question:

"Senor Garcia will meet Senor Dudley on the prairie, beyond the San Pedro?"

The answer of the planter was to turn his horse slightly, and then dash past the Plaza House into the Military Plaza, and thence on over San Pedro Creek, through the Mexican portion of the town to the plain beyond.

Carlos followed fast after, and in his rear galloped Old Rocky and a score of scouts and rangers, all resolved to see fair play.

The whole attention of the straggling crowd, who came running and riding at speed, was directed toward the two mounted men, who sat their steeds, a pistol shot apart, and facing each other.

Duke Dudley was for once silent and seemingly oppressed by his thoughts, or his position.

Riding up to the side of Carlos, Old Rocky inquired:

"How does yer perpose ter run this hyer racket, pard? What yer goin' ter fight with—stickers, er pistils?"

"I will fight Senor Dudley with any weapon he may choose," was the reply. "I have right and justice on my side, and I fear not for the result."

"Ya-as; all thet air hunk, but yer has ther ch'ice o' we'pons. Yer slapped his face, an' he air ther man what must challenge yer."

"He hasn't done so in words, but that doesn't matter."

"Ef yer fight wi' shooters, he'll plug yer through!"

"Senor Rocky," said the young man haughtily, "please to say to that caskard, Duke Dudley, that a Castilian *caballero* stoops, humbles his pride and puts himself for the time on an equality with him, for the purpose of punishing him for a cowardly outrage. Also say to him, that, at our first charge, he can use what weapon he wishes except a revolver. That arm we reserve to wind up our contest."

"I tell you confidentially, my friend, that I shall not try to kill the base insulter of my sister. That would not suit my ideas of revenge. I have humiliated him in public. I shall now do so again, and I fear not for the issue!"

"Wa-al, dod blast my great gran'mother's ole settin' ben!" exclaimed the old scout indignantly. "Ef thet air yer game, ye're goin' under, dead sure an' sartin, an' I'll hev ter do ther wurstest job o' my period o' lingerin' on this big ball o' dirt: thet air, ter tote yer back ter yer sister stiff as a wagon-tongue, an' then plant yer on Powder House Hill!"

"Never fear for me, Senor Rocky. I shall come out of this all right. Please do not delay longer. I see that Senor Hodge is to act as second to my antagonist."

The old scout felt sure, from the manner of the Castilian, that the latter had some plans of his own in connection with the duello, that would surprise his opponent, as well as the spectators.

Few, perhaps, would think of a rope or lasso as an arm to be chosen in hostile meeting; and yet a lasso may well be classed as a weapon, when in the hands of an expert lassoist, and a most dangerous and deadly weapon at that.

Carlos now cast his eyes to the born of his saddle, to ascertain if his servant had attached to it, a small well-greased lariat, that had been presented to him on his last visit to some relatives in Monterey, Mexico.

The rope was there, in a handsome coil, already run through the small silver ring, used in place of the common slip-knot.

A delicate lariat it seemingly was; but it was of buffalo calf-skin, eight strands plaited compactly by a workman who knew well his business.

Another article at the saddle-horn, held to the same by a loop, caught the eye of Carlos.

This was a quirt, as it is called in Texas; a short cow-skin whip, worn universally, looped about the waist, among the Mexicans and In-

dians of the Southwest, for the purpose of lashing their horses to greater speed, and being the only thing used by the latter to urge their animals along the trail.

Slipping this from his place, as the old scout turned away, Carlos glanced toward Duke Dudley, around whom the crowd had gradually collected.

There appeared to be some difficulty in making the proposed arrangements; but the young Castilian seemed to care nothing for that.

At length there was a scattering of the crowd in Duke's vicinity, the reason of which we will explain.

When Old Rocky advanced to confer with Carlos, Jack Hodge approached the young planter, who now sat his horse in a moody, crestfallen condition of mind, that was unusual to him.

"Duke Dudley," said Jack Hodge, "I don't like yer a dang'd bit! Fact air, I'd rather hev burros hitched onter my coach, an' change stock every mile, then pard with a man what 'ud use a female woman es you did; thet woman bein' a fust cut XXX lady, jist 'lowed by the good Lord ter locate on this yere earth a leetle while, ter show us rough cusses thet thar bees sich a place as Heaven, makes hit a dang'd sight wusser. An' thet air what makes me think thet Garcia air a-goin' ter take yer in outen ther wet."

"Garcia has slapped me in the face publicly, and I demand satisfaction," said Duke fiercely.

He shall fight me until either he or I are dead, or incapable of action. I care not what weapon he chooses. Come, hurry up! I'm gettin' dry."

"Wa-al, ole pard," said Jack, addressing Old Rocky, as the latter approached him from the conference with Carlos. "What's ther p'ogramme? Duke air in a hurry ter git hustled inter kingdom come."

As these words struck Dudley's ears, he jerked his sombrero from his head, and sent it whirling through the air, his coat quickly following it, while his eyes blazed with fury, as they lighted on his adversary.

"Yer kin fight with anythin' 'bout yer 'cept shootin'-irons ther fust dash," instructed the old scout. "Then ef yer hes life enough left, yer kin pull trigger, and sling lead!"

So saying, Old Rocky raised his hat over his head and waved it as a signal to Carlos, who tossed his sombrero to the earth, his *jaqueta* following it; then, grasping the bridle-rein in his left hand, he thrust his right into the loop of his quirt, at the same time guiding his horse to a position facing his antagonist.

Duke Dudley clutched the handle of his bowie, and leaned forward in his saddle, prepared to drive spurs home on the instant.

At a signal from Old Rocky, the horses with a snort of surprise, sprung toward each other at headlong speed. It was only a moment, and the intervening space was passed. The gleam of Duke's bowie was plainly seen, but no movement was made by Carlos, until the horse of his adversary was within three feet. Then the spectators saw the Castilian's arm describe a circle over his head. This motion was followed by a hiss; and the sharp cut of the torturing quirt came directly across the face of the young planter, who, with a shriek of agony, dropped his bowie and reins, clapping both hands to his cheeks, his horse dashing frantic over the plain, while Carlos galloped to the position from which his opponent had started.

A rousing cheer burst from the bulk of the assemblage.

Something like a quarter of a mile, did the black horse gallop before his master recovered, jerked him to a halt, and whirled about; a livid mark across both cheeks showing that the Castilian had well known the use of the weapon that he wielded.

"Look out fer yerself now, Carlos!" yelled the old scout and Jack in chorus, as Duke rode up.

"He'll git yer, dead sure," added Old Rocky, "ef yer don't keep yer eyes chuck full of chain lightnin', an' yer bull 'natemy on double biz!"

Young Garcia paid no attention to the words of his friends; neither did he draw his revolver, and Rocky and Hodge threw their sombreros on the ground, and stamped upon them, as they saw him dash to meet the planter, without drawing weapon. But in this they were mistaken.

Unobserved, Carlos had fastened the end of his lasso to the horn of his saddle, and now held the loop, and the necessary length of line for a short cast.

Like arrows from their bows, the two steeds shot toward each other; Duke Dudley, with revolver cocked in his right hand, and presented at a level with his belt.

The piercing eyes of Carlos were fastened upon this revolver. His friends stood as if petrified.

Thirty, twenty paces only intervened; then the arm of Duke Dudley shot upward a few inches, but the movement had been expected, and was detected on the very instant. A sharp report rung out on the night air. Carlos appeared to have fallen over the side of his horse. But, the next instant, and just as the horses dashed past each other, a coil of rope shot

through the air, falling directly over the head and shoulders of Duke Dudley, who fell with terrible force to the earth.

Cutting the lasso loose from the horn of the saddle, Carlos spurred toward the assembled citizens, the air ringing with wild cheers and yells of delight; the friends of the young *caballero* shaking hands, running about, and tossing their sombreros in the air, almost insane with delight.

At this moment, a young man of commanding mien and noble bearing, galloped up into the very midst of the crowd.

The new arrival had come out from the mesquites, in the direction of the town; and, lying limp and senseless in his arms, was a beautiful maiden, her face pale as marble, and her wealth of midnight hair flying about the shoulders of the stranger.

Carlos, with a cry of amazement and concern, spurred his horse forward to meet the pair, while the assembled spectators stood in silent bewilderment.

No wonder was it that they gazed in wonder.

No wonder that Carlos was astonished and alarmed; for he recognized, in the arms of the strange equestrian, the sister whom he had left, safe in her home, less than an hour before—none other than Celesta Garcia!

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE MODE OF REVENGE.

IN due time, the steamer, that had on board Colonel Wildom and his antagonist in the duello, Major Dudley, glided up to the levee at New Orleans, and was soon safely moored.

The wounded man had stood the shock, born of the loss of all his worldly wealth, and the well-aimed bullet of his antagonist, better than had been expected.

Inflammation was prevented by judiciously selected remedies, and at the time the steamer arrived, Colonel Wildom was pronounced by the surgeon out of danger.

When Major Dudley was taken to his state-room after the duello, and there left to himself, he was rendered almost as demoralized in mind, as had been his opponent previous to the tragic meeting.

Not that he cared one iota about the life of the man who had so grossly insulted him; for he would have shot him with as little regret as he would have felt in crushing the head of a rattlesnake, if he could have done so in a secret manner.

But Dudley was a proud man, and valued his prestige in society more than he did the wealth that he had won; wealth which he did not need, for he had sufficient of this world's goods before he sat down to gamble with Wildom.

He knew that the man whom he had shot was a great favorite with all; and he realized that his neighbors, many of them, would now hold themselves aloof from him.

All the opportunity for ostentatious display which had ever gratified his ruling passion was at an end, at least for some time to come.

One other thing worried him. He was a widower, as was also Colonel Wildom; a widower with three children, the youngest a baby boy of the same age as the sole heir of Wildom. He had been paying his addresses to a charming widow whose plantation adjoined his own, but who had a decided *penchant* for the man he had shot. Indeed, the two were looked upon as rivals by their friends generally.

Of this he had not thought until now.

People would say that he had ruined the man at cards expressly to get him out of the lists in the race for the widow, and the latter would most certainly repudiate his friendship and spurn his advances for the future.

He was now suffering something of the mental torture he had imposed upon Wildom, for he had indeed dexterously manipulated the cards to favor himself, and, although not appearing to have done so, had inveigled the colonel into the game, knowing well how to influence the latter by off-hand bantering.

He knew full well the business affairs of Wildom, and that he had with him the money to pay off a mortgage, and that this done, the colonel would then be in a position that would better recommend him with the fair object of their mutual ambition.

These thoughts of the situation in which he had placed himself nearly drove Dudley to madness.

The facts were plain—glaringly plain.

He had willfully and premeditatedly ruined Wildom financially, and then tortured him further into engaging in what was termed an affair of honor with him.

This, he felt assured, would be the general verdict.

In the midst of Dudley's anguish of mind one of his sporting friends raised himself to the transom of the door and gave the joyous news that Wildom would probably live.

Then came a reaction. All the jealous hatred for his rival returned, increased by realizing that the latter would now, in his wounded state, have the sympathies of the entire neighborhood, including those of the coveted widow.

He resolved now to force the colonel to make

out and sign the mortgage before he recovered; then he would foreclose as soon as it was in his power to do so, and sell the plantation and slaves at public sale. Should there be no engagement of marriage between them previous to striking this blow Dudley felt confident that the field would then be open to him.

Gathering up the bank notes and drafts that he had trampled upon in his frenzy, he placed them in his sachel, and then, pulling the bell-cord, he ordered brandy and cigars. Hoisting the window, he gazed out upon the moonlit waters of the river, and placidly smoked while he meditated upon the carrying out of his plans.

One hour after the steamer reached the Crescent City, Colonel Wildom was peacefully sleeping in a quiet apartment in the St. Charles Hotel, having been removed from the boat in an hospital ambulance; and one week after this, Major Dudley, accompanied by an unscrupulous lawyer and two witnesses, who were well paid for their trouble, entered the room of Wildom, in the absence of the negro nurse, and succeeded in obtaining his signature upon the mortgage, the colonel being passive as a child through the drugs that had been administered to him.

Weak and ill as he was, Wildom recalled this when he grew stronger, and swore to be terribly avenged.

He caused a letter to be written for his body-servant, a negro, whose wife was nurse in the family of Major Dudley. He had decided on his vengeance.

It was the thought that his own infant son was now doomed to a life of poverty that imbibed the mind of the colonel far more than any consideration for himself. And while pondering upon the probable future of his boy, he registered a vow that he should be reared in the same manner that he would have been had his fortune remained to him.

There was but one way to accomplish this.

He must give up his son!

Dearly he loved him; but it was a proof of that great love which caused him to make the sacrifice.

It was but justice; or rather justice and revenge mingled.

To kill Major Dudley would be but poor satisfaction, so he looked for an opening to present itself for him to further torture his destroyer.

The infant son of Dudley was in the care of the wife of his slave, and he knew that both these negroes would do his bidding unquestioningly.

The babes must be changed!

In after years, if he lived, when the major had grown to love the boy—if there was such a thing as affection in Dudley—he would either reveal the secret by letter or he would wait until his own son was of an age to understand the circumstances, and then they would conspire to ruin the major in the most effectual manner.

Before the much injured man arose from his couch of suffering his mind was fully made up.

The babes were changed. The change was not only undetected but not the slightest suspicion was ever entertained in regard to such a course of revenge.

Seldom did Major Dudley ever see his child, and this rendered the plan secure from detection, there being no very noticeable difference in the infants, with the exception of a red birthmark on the foot of Dudley's child, and of which the father was ignorant.

The latter, in time, foreclosed the mortgage on the plantation of Colonel Wildom, and the latter, through means obtained by the sale of some personal property, established himself in a picturesque cottage not far removed from his former home, but sadly broken both in health and spirits by the change.

The neighboring planters, however, took up his quarrel, seeking to insult Dudley on every public occasion, and the latter soon had another duel on his hands, and one in which he did not escape scathless, as before, he being shot in nearly the same way in which he had wounded Wildom, viz., through the lungs. This wound made the major a broken-down man.

The consolation he had hoped to derive from the society of his son was denied him, for the latter proved to be a wayward boy, utterly heartless, and though young in years, old in vice and extravagance.

On the other hand, the boy who had been exchanged for him proved to be a great comfort to Colonel Wildom, who, though he had fully made up his mind to hate him, grew most devotedly attached to the youth, for the nobleness of character, filial regard and sympathy which he manifested.

The education of the youth—Will Wildom, as he was called—was not neglected. At the age of fourteen he was sent to school at Louisville, Kentucky, where he distinguished himself in a creditable manner.

When Major Dudley had recovered sufficiently from his wound to attend to business he sold his plantation and a portion of his slaves, and then, fitting out a large wagon-train, proceeded to Texas, locating on the Colorado River, some distance below the State capital.

Here his son—Colonel Wildom's in reality—

grew up to man's estate, feared and detested by all who knew him.

The major died, and then Duke—for so he had named the boy—being eighteen years of age, found the entire property to be held in trust for him by a guardian—the two elder children having died in childhood.

From this on Duke became more reckless and depraved, sparing no expense to cater to his passions, for he knew that his inheritance would soon be under his own control. Included in his inheritance was a fine stock ranch on the Guadalupe River, which Duke often visited. His first act, however, on reaching his majority was to return to the scenes of his childhood, and there pass a month among his old associates.

During this short space of time he succeeded in turning the whole neighborhood over, so to speak, by his wild and extravagant course, and became involved in several difficulties, which he found it no easy matter to smooth over. His last escapade, which forced him to depart in the night for Texas to avoid being mobbed, was fighting a duel in which he fired before the word, breaking the right arm of his adversary.

The day previous to this he had grossly insulted Colonel Wildom—as a matter of course not being aware of their relationship—and, had he not fled, he would have been challenged by Will Wildom, the young man whose wealth he was squandering, and whose name and place he was unknowingly usurping.

Colonel Wildom now resolved to reveal to the noble youth, to whom he had now become greatly attached, the secret of his birth, and to urge him to claim his rights.

This he knew Will would not do, except through a course of reasoning that would prove to him that it would be a benefit to others; and, as Major Dudley had left a widowed sister in comparative poverty, much to his discredit, this woman's condition in life—she being in reality Will's aunt—was brought forward as an inducement for the young man to claim his own; in order that he might not only make his relative independent, but that he might furnish to the one who had been a kind father to him through life some of the luxuries which had been his, and of which he had been deprived by Major Dudley.

When the true circumstances were made known to Will Wildom, he seemed only filled with admiration for the old colonel for not having avenged himself in a more tragic manner. He insisted that he had nothing to forgive.

Much time, however, was passed in collecting proofs.

The old nurse had been sold; and, during the search for evidence, Colonel Wildom died. The grief of young Will was as deep and lasting as it could have been had the colonel been really his father. So prostrated was he, in fact, that another year passed before he took steps to secure his legal rights. The cottage and effects of Colonel Wildom were sold, and Will astonished his aunt by insisting on her acceptance of half the proceeds, withholding, for the present, his reasons for it. The poor woman had not the remotest idea that she was in any way related to him.

Having thus broken off from the scenes of his childhood, and relieved his mind in regard to his much-neglected aunt and her family, Will Wildom purchased a fine thoroughbred horse, with the necessary equipments, and, after visiting the grave of the man who, although no relation, had proved a more than father to him, he bade farewell to his friends, and started for Texas.

There we shall follow his trail, and learn in what manner he proceeded to regain his just rights and long-withheld inheritance.

CHAPTER VI.

WILL WILD MEETS HIS FATE.

ABOUT the same time that Duke Dudley was jerked from his horse to the floor in the Plaza Bar, a young man, mounted upon a blooded Kentucky horse, entered San Antonio, on the east branch of the trail from New Braunfels.

Leaving the mesquites, he proceeded directly to the Alamo Plaza, and halting opposite the Menger House, dismounted, delivering his animal to a little negro, to whom he gave a few words of direction in regard to the care of the horse. He then entered the hotel.

The guests were all at supper, and he strode up to the desk in the office, and in a bold hand wrote:

"WILLIAM WILD, New Orleans, La."

This done, he asked to be shown immediately to his room, where he removed the dust of travel, performed his ablutions, and made himself as neat and presentable as circumstances would admit, his baggage not having as yet arrived, it being on the way by a roundabout stage-line.

The young man was some five feet ten inches in height, of symmetrical form, and supple and lithe as a panther, his every movement showing a fire, vim and quickness of motion that would at once command notice, independent of his faultless physique and handsome features.

He was attired in a close-fitting suit of cor-

duroy, light brown in color, with a sombrero to correspond; and, as he removed his coat, there was exposed to view a Colt's navy revolver and bowie-knife, the weapons being ornamented and held in position by a stamped scabbard and holster, the latter being minus a flap, indicating that the owner thought it probable that he might be forced to draw the same at a moment's notice.

Bright flashing eyes of hazel hue, an artistic Grecian profile, with a silky moustache and goatee of recent growth, health-flushed cheeks and firm flesh—all this one saw at a glance; and nine out of ten, seeing him, would be favorably impressed at first sight, and, on first speaking with him, feel as though they had known him for years.

His spurs he unbuckled and put into his coat pocket; then, apparently satisfied with his hasty toilet, he gave a last look in the mirror, as he said:

"Duke Dudley will hardly recognize me, for I have changed considerably since he was in Kentucky. Starting a beard alters one's appearance greatly, and I am at least a head taller than when we last met.

"However, I do not in the least care whether he recognizes me or passes me by. I am on his trail, and I will study his character more carefully than formerly. Since becoming aware of our peculiar relations to each other, I have good and sufficient cause to detest him; but it is impossible to feel anything but pity for one so demoralized by drink.

"I am annoyed at being forced to travel under but a part of the name I have borne since infancy; but he will not, should he examine the register, imagine that William Wild is Will Wildom.

"I'll go down to supper now; and then for a walk about town. I declare, I'm as hungry as a bear! These rides over the prairies make one ravenous."

With these words, Will Wild, as we must call him, the son and lawful heir of the late Major David Dudley, descended to the bar and passed through the patio, or court-yard of the Menger House, to the dining-room.

After he had satisfied his hunger, Will returned to the bar; and, as he lighted his cigar by one end of the counter, a dilapidated individual, who was evidently fishing for a drink, came breathlessly up to the bar, and said, in a hasty excited voice:

"Jim, ther devil is ter pay over at ther Plaza Bar!"

"What's up?" asked the gentlemanly vender of fluids.

"Why Duke Dudley is in town on another jamboree, an' hes gut hisself in a tight box. He jerked Celestie Garcia up before him in his saddle, when she was on her way ter church, and galloped with her inter the bar, where somebody snatched ther gal away from him, an' knocked his senses out—thet is, what little he hed left, arter pourin' down p'ison fer an hour or two.

"Thet ain't all, Jim; fer Carlos Garcia is on ther rampage arter Duke, an' hes tuck his sister home. Ef thar ain't blood spilled afore midnight, chalk me down a liar! An' yer kin chalk me down fer a drink, Jim, fer I'm dog-goned dry, an' I hain't got a picayune with me!"

Will Wild waited to hear no more; but tossing a dollar on the bar, saying, "Give that man what he wants," he rushed to the stable of the hotel and ordered his horse to be saddled immediately.

The hotel employees were all favorably impressed by the new arrival, and his sudden and hurried departure was attributed to a desire on his part to see the "fun" in connection with the "jamboree" of Duke Dudley. The man who had profited, to the extent of a dollar, by bringing the news from the Plaza Bar, followed the stranger to the stable, where, after the departure of the latter, he related his connection with the new arrival in a boasting and consequential manner, at the same time displaying seven "bits" which he had received in change out of the dollar, after taking his drink, which was a "real ole he stiffener."

Will Wild rode on rapidly until he reached the Plaza Bar, where he dismounted, and entering, called for a cigar, inquiring of the bar-keeper, in a casual manner, why it was that the place had such a deserted air at that time in the evening.

"Dose beoples goes mit der oder side dot San Pedro," explained Lingsweider, "to see dot fi-ut. Carlos Garcia he shoots, I dinks, mit dot Juke. But you vos a sdranger, und knows not dot Juke. He vos von tuyfel. Yaw, he vos vone hundred t'ousand tuyfels!"

"It vos petter you geeps away mit him, or he bicks you ub an' mops dot Blaza mit you.

"You comes from der Shtates, und you looks somedings like dot Juke, and he vill see dot. He would not hafe a man in Texas vot would look somedings like him. He vipes you oud, right away."

Lingsweider was evidently disappointed at having the "fun" transferred from his bar to the other side of the San Pedro, and also somewhat lonesome in consequence.

His words, however, made no impression upon

Will Wild, except so far as they related to the movements of Duke Dudley. He therefore asked quickly:

"In what direction is the San Pedro, sir?"

"Vell, if you vill go, I shows you," said George.

Stepping to the threshold, and pointing west, he said:

"Gallop down dot sdreet, und you gits in dot Millerday Blaza; den you geeps on sdrait ahead dill you sdrikes dot shaparral, und den maype I dinks you sees dot cirgus, don't id?"

With a hasty "thanks," Will sprung into his saddle, again put spurs, and dashed on as directed.

He soon approached the line of mesquites beyond the dwellings, that shut out from view the plain.

At this point, to his amazement, a beautiful girl, with staring eyes and pale face, galloped past him, riding in the same direction.

They both dashed into the mesquites at nearly the same moment, the bushes being of such a height as to allow one mounted upon a horse to overlook the scene beyond.

No sooner did the maiden reach the mesquites than she jerked rein quickly and sat as if paralyzed.

Following her gaze, Will saw two horsemen bounding toward each other at headlong speed, evidently with deadly intent. Only for a moment did this sight meet the eye of Will Wild; then came a flash and a sounding report, and one of the riders appeared at the very instant to fall over the side of his steed.

Terribly impressed as was Will by this sight, his attention was immediately withdrawn to the fair girl in front of him, who suddenly fell forward upon the neck of her horse, her fingers clutching the mane of the animal with a spasmodic grip.

At once the young man spurred forward, and thrusting his arm about her waist he drew her gently from her saddle, and placing her in an easy position before him, gazed with intense wonder and admiration upon the face now so marble-like.

For a time Will remained totally oblivious to his surroundings, then he darted a quick glance toward the plain.

A black horse, fully equipped, was galloping madly about, and the form of a man, evidently the rider, lay outstretched upon the plain, seemingly dead.

A series of yells and hurrahs to his right drew Will's attention, and he saw another horseman, whom he judged to be one of the principals in the singular duel, riding up to a crowd of excited men, some of whom were mounted and some on foot.

Will felt sure that this man was not Duke Dudley; in fact, a second look caused him to decide positively that it was not, for he was of short stature and somewhat slight build. It was evident, then, that Duke lay dead or insensible on the plain.

If this was so, then the man who was riding toward the crowd of citizens must be the Carlos Garcia who had been mentioned by the man at the Menger House, and also by George Lingsweider.

Recalling all that he had heard, it now occurred to Will that the maiden he held in his arms was Celestia Garcia. But to explain her presence?

Duke Dudley had outrageously insulted her. Her brother had escorted her home, and then challenged Dudley to deadly combat. Suspecting her brother's intention, she had, in some manner, stolen away from her attendants, and galloped toward the scene of the duel with the intention of trying to save his life; but seeing him fall over the side of his horse, as the pistol of his opponent exploded, she believed him to be killed, and so had fainted. Yes, all was plain, except the escape of Carlos, and his victory in the *duello*.

The latter part of the strange conflict had escaped Will's notice, through his solicitude for the fainting maiden.

These reasonings and consequent conclusions flashed through Will's mind in a moment; then he drove spurs, and dashed from the mesquites toward and into the crowd of wondering men, as we have recorded, with the senseless girl in his arms, the saddled horse of the maiden following behind, and explaining in part, to the wondering spectators, the presence of a woman in their midst.

As Carlos spurred up alongside the horse of Will, after recognizing his sister, he was speechless at beholding her thus in the arms of a stranger; but his mind was partially relieved by the words of the latter, spoken as they were in a mellow, honest tone of voice, that expressed both a sympathy and a regard, indicating that the speaker knew more of him and his affairs than he did of the new-comer.

Indeed, Carlos immediately decided that he had never seen the young man before, although, at first glance, this had not been his impression.

"If I mistake not," said Will Wild, "your name is Carlos Garcia, and this lady is your sister. I am proud of the burden that I carry, but I beg you to take her home, for she needs immediate attention. I was on my way to wit-

ness this affair, and the young lady galloped past me; but she fainted at the report of your adversary's pistol, when you reeled over the side of your horse, and I saved her from falling and brought her to you."

"Ten thousand thanks, señor!" exclaimed Carlos, taking Celesta in his arms as he spoke. "I know not what to say to express my gratitude, but I hope I shall have the honor and pleasure of meeting you again. I must now return home at once."

"Shall I follow with the señorita's horse? Any assistance I can render," said Will, "I will give most cheerfully."

"You are very kind; and if you are at liberty, I shall be happy to have you accompany me."

With these words, his eyes bent in tender solicitude upon the death-like features of his sister, Carlos urged his steed toward the town.

Grasping the bridle-rein of the horse that had been ridden by the beautiful Castilian girl, Will Wild turned to the wonderfully impressed citizens, all of whom thought they had noticed a resemblance between the stranger and Duke Dudley, and called out in a cheery voice, at the same time lifting his sombrero in polite greeting:

"Gentlemen, I bid you good-night! I am a stranger in San Antonio, but I do not intend to remain a stranger very long. I hope to meet you all again and to become better acquainted. My name is Will Wild, and I am stopping at the Menger House. Good-night, all!"

With these words, Will spurred on after Carlos Garcia, while the air rung with cheers for Will Wild; the latter having, by his style, appearance, dash and speech, taken the citizens, high and low, by storm; they being, without exception, greatly impressed in his favor.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE MIRROR-SMASHING.

NEVER before had Carlos Garcia been called upon to display his skill as a horseman and lassoist in public; and he felt the utmost relief at knowing that his dexterity had served him so well, enabling him to humiliate Duke Dudley and to avenge the cowardly insult offered to his sister without being compelled to take human life.

He had met Duke Dudley but a few times, never having spoken with him, but he had been told much in regard to his desperate and unprincipled character, and this gave him cause for self-gratulations that matters had been no worse between them.

For all that, he felt sure that it was not at an end.

The stranger who had so suddenly appeared upon the scene had spoken as one who knew both him and Celesta, at least by reputation. This young man resembled Duke Dudley somewhat in appearance; but he differed greatly in expression of face, and it was evident that, in character, they must be directly opposite.

Carlos felt that he might need friends; and this stranger, he was positive, was an honest and brave man.

With this thought, he urged his horse as rapidly as he could, under the circumstances; his mind so filled with anguish in regard to Celesta as to cause him to call loudly for help as soon as his horse had passed through the open gate and he had entered the gardens that surrounded Casa Garcia.

A man servant appeared at once, and then the maid of Celesta, who had just discovered the absence of her young mistress. The former took charge of the horse, and Carlos carried his sister to her chamber, where he soon became satisfied that she had merely fainted, and would speedily recover.

Will Wild rode into the garden at the moment that Carlos emerged from the *casa*. The latter met him with extended hand, and said, warmly:

"Señor, it gives me much pleasure, and does me honor to welcome you to my home! My sister, I trust, will soon recover. Had she fallen from her horse and lain all night in the mesquites, it might have been serious indeed. Welcome, thrice welcome to Casa Garcia!"

"It would please me much," said Will in reply, "if you would refrain from mentioning what you term a service in connection with myself. I trust, indeed, that your sister will recover at once, for I have heard of the outrageous treatment received by her at the hands of the miscreant, Duke Dudley, whom you have so justly punished."

As the young man ceased speaking, Carlos opened a side door in the arched hall and ushered him into a brilliantly lighted and luxuriously furnished room, politely escorting his guest to an easy-chair, taking his sombrero, and advancing at once to a sideboard, where he poured two glasses of El Paso wine, and politely passed one of them to his guest, who quickly arose from his chair to receive it.

Standing within three paces of each other beneath the glare of a dozen wax candles in a gorgeous candelabra above them, the two young men seemed engaged, as they really were, in reading each other.

"Señor, may I ask your name?" inquired Carlos.

"Excuse me," was the reply, "I should have been more thoughtful. I am called William Wild, and I am at present stopping at the Menger House."

"Thanks!" rejoined the Castilian, raising his glass. "Here is to your very good health and our better acquaintance!"

The two drank heartily, and then Carlos said: "Señor Wild, please resume your seat, and excuse me for a moment. I am anxious with reference to my sister. I will see if she has recovered."

"Do not mind me in the least," said Will, "I can stay but a moment, as I have decided to ascertain the extent of Duke Dudley's injuries."

The young Castilian bowed politely and left the room.

He was somewhat amazed. Here was a man who had only just arrived in San Antonio, and who upon their first meeting had called him by name, and who now seemed to have sufficient interest in Duke Dudley to lead him out in the night time to inquire the extent of that ruffian's injuries.

But Carlos banished these thoughts, feeling sure that all would be explained in time. He now hastened through the *casa* to the north wing, entering the music-room adjoining the apartment of his sister, and touching a small silver bell.

In response the maid, Juanita, entered the room, her features expressing relief and joy as she approached Carlos, saying in a jubilant voice:

"Señor Garcia, I am happy—oh, so happy! The señorita has opened her eyes and is breathing naturally."

The face of Carlos beamed with joy at this intelligence, and he quickly ordered Juanita to lead him to his sister, who probably believed him to have been killed.

The eyes of the young girl were fixed upon the ceiling. Their expression indicating that she was endeavoring to unravel some mind mystery; and as Carlos hesitated at the door, his feet having made no noise upon the thick carpet, she appeared to have become at once conscious of what had occurred.

Suddenly her features became convulsed with horror, and she sprang to a sitting posture on the couch, pressing her palms tight upon her brow, and closing her eyes without having noticed her brother.

All this passed in a moment. The next Carlos was by her side whispering tender and reassuring words.

With a quick movement Celesta opened her eyes, and seeing who it was that was beside her the look of horror and anguish gave place to one of most intense relief, while her fair arms were wound about him.

Back and forth in the other wing of the *casa* paced Will Wild, the image of that same fair girl photographed on his brain and governing his heart throbs.

Never before had he met a maiden that had so impressed him. The fair Castilian had so filled him with a strange and heavenly happiness, that he would have bartered his all in this world to have been enabled to say and know that she loved him.

And he was now beneath the same roof with her; waiting—oh, so impatiently!—to hear whether she had recovered; and, as he thought of the devilish act of Duke Dudley, thought of how this unprincipled and debased ruffian had, in his reckless bravado, with perhaps no other object than to vent his utter disregard of law, order, and decency, before a drunken rabble, had clasped the form of this angelic creature in his disgraceful embrace, galloping with her into a public bar-room—as he reviewed the facts, as he had heard them detailed at the Menger House, Will Wild clinched his fists, and set his teeth, swearing in his furious anger, that he would bring the miscreant who had done this, down to groveling degradation and poverty!

Previous to this, Will had felt some sympathy for Duke, feeling that perhaps he was not "so black as he had been painted," and that the bad influences which had ever surrounded him, and the lavish amount of wealth at his disposal had made him what he was. He also felt some charity for him, on account of his being the son of the man who had been a father to himself; and who, by changing the babes out of revenge, had perhaps saved him from being just such a man as was Duke Dudley.

Now, however, since he had become aware of the perfidy of the young planter, Will felt naught but contempt and hatred for him; a feeling that was a thousand times stronger from the fact that Celesta Garcia had been so terribly treated by him.

The whole nature of Will revolted against a man who would be so degraded and soulless, as to cause such an angel one bitter thought.

But, to return to the brother and sister.

Both gazed into each other's eyes, Carlos exclaiming:

"My poor sister! You have suffered much."

"Brother mine, I thought you were dead. Was I dreaming, when I saw you shot by that terrible man?"

"You were not dreaming. You saw it; at least my movements would have caused you to suppose that I was shot; for I threw myself to the opposite side of the horse to avoid the bullet. I then quickly recovered my position, and lassoed him by a backward cast of the noose, jerking him to the ground violently, where he probably now lies, unless he has been removed by some of his degraded comrades."

"But, brother, why did you seek a quarrel with that bad man? Had you been killed, I should be alone in the world, and then I should die broken-hearted!"

"A Garcia allows no man to insult him or his, Celesta! that is enough. But, do you remember passing, in your gallop across the San Pedro, a fine-looking gentleman, mounted upon a large American horse?"

"No; I remember nothing of my ride, except that dread scene upon the plain."

"You know from what position you viewed that scene?"

"Yes; I recollect that my horse was standing amid mesquites, over the tops of which I saw you."

"Well, sister, you fainted then, and there you would have lain, to be carried away perhaps by Duke Dudley upon his recovery, had it not been for the young man you passed on your way."

"He is a gentleman, I am positive, of the highest social stamp: an honorable and brave man, and he brought you to me at the time that I joined the citizens, after unhorsing my opponent."

"Santa Guadalupe!" cried the young girl, in amazement and distress. "I shall die with mortification! I shall be the talk of the town! Who is this man of whom you speak? I hope you did not neglect to thank him, and to assure him of my thanks?"

"I left the last for you to do, Celesta. This gentleman is now under my roof, waiting to learn the state of your health. He led your horse home, and it would please me greatly, if you feel equal to the interview, to have you accompany me to the parlor, and allow me to introduce you. We need friends, such as I believe him to be. Will you go, sister mine?"

The young girl hesitated, but soon spoke.

"I suppose it is my duty. There can be no harm in anything that you advise. Yes, I will go to him. Do you return to the gentleman, and I will join you in a short time. I must perform my toilet!"

With a grateful smile, Carlos left the room, and returned to his guest, whom he found impatiently pacing the floor, but who came to an abrupt halt, with an anxious and inquiring expression upon his face as Carlos entered.

His announcement of the immediate attendance of his sister caused the features of Will to express the greatest relief and pleasure.

The latter then explained the way in which he had obtained information of the duel, and also stated the fact of his having but just arrived in the city. Carlos then gave him, in detail, the manner in which he had defeated Duke Dudley.

In ten minutes more the door opened, and Juanita appeared, announcing in a silvery voice, her eyes fastened admiringly upon the stranger guest:

"Señorita Celesta Garcia!"

Carlos advanced, took the hand of his sister, and led her forward. The fair girl's eyes were bent upon the carpet in modest diffidence, born of the consciousness that she had so lately been held in the arms of the man before her.

"Señorita Garcia, I have the honor and pleasure of presenting you to the acquaintance and friendship of Señor William Wild. Señor Wild, my sister!"

The eyes of the young man and the maiden met.

The former were filled with an intense adoration that could not be masked; the latter, with a mingled modesty and admiration that she could not withhold.

Will bent forward in polite acknowledgment, his lips parted to speak, when with a thundering report, which was followed by the crash of a large mirror, within which they had all been reflected, they started back simultaneously, not knowing what had come, or what was to follow.

Guided by the way in which the sound came, Celesta turned, and then uttered a piercing shriek.

All then saw beneath the uprising, curling smoke at the barred window, a most fiendish and malignant face. The eyes were bloodshot, the teeth were set, and the lips curled away from them, like those of a wild animal. The face was framed in a shock of tangled, wild, and flowing black hair, while across it, from ear to ear, was a swollen, livid mark, fully a quarter of an inch in width.

For an instant only was this face to be seen. The next, a wild, vengeful yell rung out, amid a crashing of shrubbery, followed by the sound of a galloping steed. Then all was still.

Carlos, Will, and Celesta gazed into each other's eyes in the utmost wonder and amazement, not unmingled with apprehension; for they knew that the unsuccessful and cowardly assassin was none other than Duke Dudley!

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD ROCKY OPINES.

"Dog-gone my ole gran'-marm's bestest tom-cat!" exclaimed Old Rocky, as he sat on the plain amid the motley crowd who had witnessed the duel between Carlos and Duke Dudley, the old scout puffing nervously at a corn-cob pipe; "this hev tin a lively little circus, takin' inter consideration thet hit come off in civerlize."

"Ther boss bug in ther bog gut salervated 'bout every time he tried ter flop a wing, an' he's a-lyin' on his back, like a dead mud-turkle."

"Hit's a open argyment, whether he'll ever soar ag'in, er jist flop roun' 'mong ther mesquites, like a bob-tailed buzzard. Reckon, ef thar's any sand left in his gizzard, he'll hump hisself arter this hyer ole raw-hide ripper ter git satisfac' fer my jerkin' him off'n his hoss. Mebbe so thar's some sucker in this hyer leetle crowd that follers Duke Dudley's trail arter free driuks, like kiotes follers a wagon train er a scoutin' party ter pick thar bones. Ef thar air, an' they feels kinder hurted at these hyer remarks, let 'em slosh out inter cl'ar moonlight, an' ther ole man'll give 'em a raffle o' fun, one er two at a time, bettin' high thet he'll furnish cor-pusses enough ter locate a graveyard right hyer. Doesn't yer think thet air 'bout ther way ter kerry out ther p'ogramme, pard Jack?"

"I hopes ter never kick a break, jark a ribbon, er snap a whip, ef yer ain't talkin' in lingo ter suit this station! Thet's jist ther style sot down on ther way-bill, an' may I wreck my coach nex' time I drive down ther Guadalupe Ford, ef I ain't with yer, every time!"

"Thet Carlos air a slam-up squar' an' white citizen, an' when he takes ther bit 'tween his teeth on a lone stompede, he's a-goin' ter make things hum. Ther way he slung thet lariat war a caution ter pilgrims what hes a lingerin' notion o' buckin' ag'in him; an' I reckon he's marked Duke for life 'cross ther pictur' part o' his 'natermy, by the slash o' thet quirt."

Not a man, in the mixed crowd of rancheros, teamsters and citizens, showed the slightest indication to go to the assistance of Duke Dudley, for fear of appearing to be in any way upholding him in his outrageous conduct; but there were those present, who would have investigated his condition, and relieved him, if Old Rocky and his friends had not been there, for they well knew they would be rewarded for so doing.

As it was, none felt like compromising himself, or braving the anger, animosity, or ridicule of the old scout, Jack Hodge, and many others.

Old Rocky well understood the character of all present; and he knew that when himself and his friends returned to the town, there were men who would sneak from the crowd, and go to the assistance of the badly used up duelist.

This he determined to prevent, and the way to do it was soon decided on.

He felt positive that Duke Dudley was not dangerously injured, and that, if let alone, he would come to himself before any great length of time.

"Pards," said the old scout, removing his pipe, and knocking the ashes out against his boot-heel; "I'm a-gamblin' heavy thet ther stranger what hev a cluss look like Duke Dudley, but 'pears ter be a slam-up, clean-grit white man, I'm a-bettin' thet he hes skuted this-a ways ter make Dudley squar' up some cussed mean scrape he's bin an' gone an' did, over Colorado River way."

"Ef Duke hev gut ary nigh blood relations, thar hard down on him, sure es shootin'; an' I opines thet ther cuss hev done somethin' putty hefty mean east'ard, an' ther cord'roy-kivered coon what brung in Celesty from 'mong ther mesquites, air arter him."

"Hit makes me crawl, all over, when I thinks of how that cussed Duke yanked thet gal onter his nag, an' loped inter ther Plaza Bar; but ef he didn't git yanked hisself or-mighty suddint-like, I'm a bald-headed liar! Some on yer, go an' wake up thet Duke. I'd like ter see a leetle more fun."

"Another man stretched out stiff thar in ther moonlight 'nd make a purtier pictur'; an' ther pilgrims, what happens ter be nigh when Duke 'comes back ter Texas,' mebbe'll git a hole er two through 'em, ef I ain't mighty mistaken. What yer think, Jack? Ain't ther ole man talkin' solid hoss sense?"

"Yer allus does, ole pard; an' I war a-puttin' up ther posish o' things, jist es yer hes slung it. Ef any pilgrims wants ter be checked through ther kingdom come, pre-paid, without a show of crawlin' inter ther hind boot, an' smugglin' hisself back, he'd better disturb Duke's siesty!"

"He's es quiet now, es a perrarer dog arter bein' swaller'd by a 'rattler,' but thar'll be a circus, menadgery, an' side shows, ontill yer can't rest, an' fire-works counted in, when he comes back to his reg'lar biz. Howsomer, I'm dry, an' I'm a-p'intin' fer ther Plaza Bar, straight es a bee can hum hisself."

"Dang'd ef thet doesn't fit me ter a dot, Jack," assented Old Rocky, as he arose with evident difficulty. "I've sot hyer, in ther heavy dew, ontill I'm es stiff es a wagon tongue."

Ther ole man hev ter keep a-movin' o' nights, er crawl under a blanket.

"Time was when I c'u'd go ter sleep, up ter my neck in a post-oak bog, an' slosh out, come sun-up, es limber es a eel. Come on, pards! Less levant plaza-ways. Enny pilgrim what's dry, an' keers ter pour down a leetle p'ison with Old Rocky, let him glide straight erlong. But I means straight whisk', fer I doesn't 'low ter pay fer no 'ristercratic fluids what yer sucks through a straw—not much!"

"Dang'd ef they hain't what made Duke putty sick, with ther help o' Carlos; and ef I'd gut wo'sted thet-a-way, I'd go an' hide in a kiote hole ontill Gabriel toots thet bugle o' his'n!"

"What yer mean by thet?" asked Jack Hodge, quickly. "Who's this Gabriel? A stage-driver, I reckon?"

"I reckon he's ther boss o' a dang'd big line of or-mighty sizy stages, Jack; er he couldn't take all of us humans off'n this yearth, when things air 'bout ter bu'st up. Reckless Joe war a-readin' all 'bout Gabriel, an' a hefty herd o' other boss sperits, what used ter be right smart scouts long ergo, an' he's gut a mighty high persish in t'other worl'. But I can't git nary holt on ther rope, es regards 'em. Hit's a leetle tew deep fer ther ole man; but I'm a reckonin' hit'll be all made plain an' cl'ar, when we-'uns guides 'over ther range.' Leastways, I'm willin' ter take my chances with ther humans what's tried ter live squar' and white."

"I've done ther bestest I could, since I kin 'member; an' hit ain't my fault thet I can't read books what directs folks plain inter kingdom come, on ther whiz."

The latter portion of this conversation was engaged in as Jack, Old Rocky, and a number of rangers proceeded through the belt of mesquites, and thence over the San Pedro; others of the crowd following some fifty paces in the rear, and not one having remained in the vicinity of Duke Dudley.

They had not yet reached the Military Plaza, being between the Court-House and Linn's gun-shop, when Old Rocky punched Jack in the ribs, and then pointed over his shoulder, shaking with suppressed mirth, as he said:

"Jack, every dang'd galoot air a-follerin'. Nary one thinks hit's healthy ter wake up Duke, arter what I slung out. He'll hev a lone game with hisself, when his head mersheerney commences ter git back ter hit's reg'lar biz!"

"I know'd yer gab 'nd bluff 'em," said Jack, laughing heartily; "but I shouldn't be 'tall surprised ef Duke comes jist a-b'ilin' inter ther Plaza Bar afore a hour. Does he know hit war you jarked him off'n his crittur?"

"I'll sw'ar he didn't git a peep at me when I played ther trick; but, arter he gut on his pegs ag'in, an' I war hid at ther end o' ther bar, he see'd my reflect' in ther side lookin'-glass, an' not bein' 'zactly squar' an' reg'lar in his upper story, he let fly with his six, an' sent a ball through ther shiny consarn, makin' 'bout fourteen hundred streaks, runnin' out from hit every which way, like a round Roarer Borealis, es Joe Booth calls hit, what shoots up toward ther North Pole on a cold night."

"Hes they gut two poles ter this hyer yearth?"

"Wa-al, I reckon thar must be; fer Joe says so, an' what he spits out yer kin gamble on sure."

"Wonder how many critturs they hitch on, ter keep ther ole shebang on ther whiz?"

"Thar yer hes gut me, Jack; but I'll ax Joe nex' time he shows up. Howsomer, I'm dang'd sartin thar ain't nary nag in ther biz now. Thar mought ha' bin long ago; but ther critturs must ha' hed wings on thar shoulders, an' bin or-mighty high-fly plugs. This hyer world air kep' on ther whiz 'bout now, an' hes bin since George Wash'n'ton stomped ther Britishers by ther 'Merikin Eagle!"

"Mebbe so thar's more'n one hitched on, Jack. I'm inclernated ter think thar bees mos' likely."

Here they entered the Main Plaza, and proceeded directly to Charley Pyron's bar; and there we will leave them, and return to the plain, where we left Duke Dudley "alone in his glory."

The moon still shone brightly, and the young planter lay where he had been jerked by the lasso, he having struck the earth with such violence that he was rendered senseless, besides terribly bruised, as well as severely shaken internally.

His once handsome but now bloated face was upturned to the moon, showing the livid mark made by the single torturing stroke of the quirt.

The noble black steed which he had rode had at the first stampeded wildly over the plain, but had now returned and was sniffing the air near where its master lay. Deserted by all human kind, and left, for aught that any one knew, to die, this noble animal alone showed any sign of devotion or attachment.

But Duke Dudley soon revived. He sprang to a sitting posture, his blood-shot eyes glaring like those of a famished wolf. Only a moment, however, did he remain bewildered. Soon all the humiliating circumstances of the evening and night flashed into his mind, and he began to curse in his impotent fury.

He had, in the presence of a crowd of spectators, been degraded, and defeated in a duel with Carlos Garcia.

This was too much. It was enough to make one insane. Duke was filled with a perfect frenzy. His brutal nature showed itself most plainly; and, as he grasped the rein of his horse, he struck the noble animal a blow upon its muzzle.

Springing into the saddle, he sat his steed for a few moments, striving to collect his thoughts and to decide what move to make in the way of his revenge.

Celesta Garcia he had never seen before the previous evening, except at a distance, and it was only when he held her in his arms that he realized how beautiful in face and form she was.

Now that she had escaped him, through the means of some person unknown—for he could not form the slightest idea as to who it was that jerked him from his horse in the bar—he was a thousand times more eager, more determined, to abduct her.

He felt sure that Carlos was not the man who had torn her from his clutches, for the young Castilian would most certainly have killed him on the impulse of the moment, had he seen him bearing his sister away. It was a mystery, indeed, that Carlos had not shot him in the duel, instead of using his lasso.

Duke recalled the fact that he had shot at the reflection of a man in the mirror at the Plaza Bar; but he could not recall the face of the man, and he now cursed himself for having drank more than he could carry.

The more he thought of the situation of his affairs, the more enraged he became, until at last, in his fury, he urged his horse in the direction of the Casa Garcia.

Riding slowly along by the wall, he reached the gate, and to his joy found it open. With excellent feelings he also saw lights streaming out from the barred windows. Somewhat suspicious, very nervous, and most intensely excited by his maddening thoughts, expecting each instant that some one would shoot at him, Duke walked his horse slowly into the grounds, taking advantage of the shrubbery, and dismounted near the dwelling, throwing his bridle-rein over a broken limb.

He then, with revolver in hand, stealthily approached a window, from which proceeded the sound of human voices.

Within the thick shrubbery, through which he made his way, it was quite dark—a fact which he did not take into consideration in his excitement—and hearing the voice of Carlos Garcia, a voice that caused his blood to boil with murderous fury, he sprang at once to the window, pressing his face against the bars, and his revolver between the same; but the glare of light so blinded him, coming up as he had done from the dark thicket, that he could not readily distinguish objects.

The first sight he caught of the occupants of the room, or what he imagined to be such, was only their reflection, the figure of Carlos being prominent.

He paused not for an instant, but fired, his frenzy being changed to jealous rage, that was almost ungovernable, at seeing Celesta in close company with a gentleman whose face was not in view.

The flitting sight of the reflection, and the shot that followed, occupied but a moment's time. Then, realizing his peril, Duke Dudley darted back, sprang upon his horse, and galloped through the gardens to the river, urging the animal across, and disappearing among the pecans on the opposite side, thus rendering pursuit useless.

CHAPTER IX.

CORTINA THE SCOURGE.

DUKE DUDLEY proceeded perhaps a quarter of a mile from the point at which he had crossed the San Antonio River, allowing his horse to make its way at will among the branches of the pecans.

That his brain was in an insane and demoralized condition, must be apparent to the reader.

There were moments when all would become plain to him, each recent exciting event standing out in a clear picture, and during these moments he could see that he had acted in a very hasty and foolish manner, and that his mind must be at times in such a condition as to prevent him from reasoning in regard to position or action.

However, he fully believed that he had shot Carlos Garcia, for the distance between him and the mirror was so short that the sound of the ball entering the glass blended with the report. His position now was so perilous, and his mind so maddened, that he had but a very indistinct idea of what had passed.

The presence of another man in the parlor had only been realized by Duke at the very instant when he pulled trigger, and this fact caused him to bound away before he had obtained any clear view of the interior of the apartment, for he fully expected that this man would, at the moment he saw Carlos was shot, spring out from the *casa* and pursu him to the death.

Deep in thought, Duke rode on slowly through

the San Antonio River bottom toward the well-known horseshoe bend—the scene of a bloody battle between the Texans and a war-party of Comanches previous to the massacre of the Alamo.

With bowed head, knitted brows, and a whirl of mad passions in his brain, on he went, unconscious that ahead of him was a low-browed, swarthy, murderous-looking Mexican, who stole along amid the undergrowth, in a spy-like manner, casting back from time to time exultant glances.

For a short distance only did the sneaking Greaser remain in the immediate vicinity; only long enough to satisfy himself as to the direction the Texan was traveling. Then he shot ahead, and soon bounded into an opening in the timber of about a quarter of an acre in extent.

This open space was not, however, free from animal life, for a score and a half of villainous-looking Mexicans or half-breeds, all armed with *escopetas* and long knives, sat on their horses, as if awaiting the return of the spy.

In the midst of this crowd was a man of commanding mien, his form indicating muscular strength far superior to those around him.

His face would have been handsome had it not been for the desperate and merciless look stamped thereon.

His hair, eyes, mustache, and goatee were black, the former hanging in thick masses over his shoulders.

He was mounted upon a large steed of mingled Spanish and mustang blood, the animal showing points for both speed and endurance. It was evidently but recently off free range, as it continually stepped about, tossing its head and snorting, its bright eyes shooting glances in every direction.

The horseman was none other than Juan M. Cortina, the leader of the largest and most desperate band of Mexican bandits ever collected together, and who was later on, at the time of the invasion of Maximilian, appointed a general in the Mexican army. He was richly, even gorgeously attired, and his sombrero brim, which was wide, was bound with gold braid, a golden serpent, with rubies in the place of eyes, serving as a band.

All maintained a respectful distance from this man, whose very look was such as to command unquestioned obedience from such men as were his followers.

The spy went directly up to within three paces of the head of the horse upon which sat Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande; and, touching the brim of his sombrero, he made a signal of caution. He then pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Who is it?" asked Cortina, quickly.

"I do not know, my capitan. It is one Texan."

Waving his hand in a sweeping circle about the opening, Cortina said, in a low, clear voice: "*Silencio!*" (Keep still.)

Every man, including the spy, turned his horse into the undergrowth as noiselessly as possible, all being concealed at equal distances around the opening. Then, reining his horse backward, the bandit chief, a revolver in each hand, brought them to bear upon the path ahead.

A moment afterward the head of Duke Dudley's horse was thrust through the branches; then, as if receiving the spur, it sprang forward into the open space. Duke Dudley jerked the steed to haunches, for the impressive picture before him was suggestive of instant death. He turned ghastly white except where the lash of the quirt had left its livid mark.

"What want you, *Senor Texano?*"

These words shot from the mouth of Cortina in a voice and manner that meant business; but Duke sat on his horse dazed and speechless.

"Come hither!" commanded the outlaw chief, adding the next moment, "Quickly!"

Duke Dudley drove spurs and guided his horse to the side of Cortina, a movement that saved his life, for had he attempted to escape he would have been riddled with bullets.

"Where ride you in the night, sir, and who has given you the lash that should only be laid on the back of a slave?" inquired Cortina.

The first fright of the young planter was now gone, and all his desperate fury returned, doubled by the degradingly-worded allusion to the mark upon his face, which gave him extreme torture.

Having been deserted by all and left to wander in the woods, with no companion except his maddening thoughts, Duke now felt like venting his rage in threats and curses against the man who had defeated and disgraced him in public.

He knew not the character of the man who had so unexpectedly "got the drop on him," neither did he care; but he judged that he was one who would not dare be in his present position by light of day.

There was an undefinable something that led Duke to suspect that he was in the presence of a desperate man against whom the law held claim, but not for a moment did he dream that he was in the power of Cortina, the celebrated bandit of the Bravo.

He therefore answered, in a voice of rage:

"I ride to no particular place, sir. I am eluding pursuit by keeping in the timber, for I have but a short time since shot the man who struck me in the face with his quirt as I lay asleep."

"Shot him! Who was this man?"

"Senor Carlos Garcia," was the answer.

Cortina lowered his revolvers, giving a slight start of surprise. Then he asked quietly:

"Where was Senor Garcia when you shot him?"

"In his *casa*. A quarter of a mile, or more, from here."

"Has he not a sister who is very beautiful?"

"Yes; and I have sworn that she shall be mine!"

"Have you friends who will assist you to abduct her?"

"No. My so-called friends have deserted me. But gold will buy friends, and of that I have plenty."

"Ah, say you so? What is your name, *senor?*"

"I have been called Duke Dudley, the Desperate; but henceforth I will give them leave to call me Duke Dudley, the Devil! If you will pard with me you shall roll in gold."

"Ah, say you so?" repeated the outlaw with a strange expression upon his face. Again he spoke:

"Where is this gold of which you speak?"

"I have a big ranch on the Guadalupe and a plantation on the Colorado, and I will sacrifice anything for revenge. There is another man in San Antonio whose blood I will have if I can ferret him out. I had Celesta Garcia in my power, and should have got away with her if I had not been too drunk to reason or to take care of myself."

"I suppose you dare not return to San Antonio, as you are now a marked man. In spite of your great wealth, I venture to presume that you would lose your life did you enter the Main Plaza. Am I correct, *Sir Texan?*"

"I dare do anything to carry out my projects."

"You will lead the way, then, to the fandango house of Madame Candeliro, one mile from the Main Plaza. There we will have a dance, and then to the *casa* of Carlos Garcia! We will steal the fair Celesta and the *pesos* of Senor Carlos at the same time."

"You do not realize the difficulties in the way. We should both be shot, for they are now on the alert."

"I am one who allows no difficulties in his trail to hinder him from carrying out his plans."

With these words Cortina gave a peculiar bird-like cry, and out from the bushes, as one man, rode his ruffianly followers.

Duke Dudley was amazed, and his strong form trembled as if he had been stricken with an ague-fit.

"You observe, *Senor Dudley*," said the bandit chief, "that I travel not alone; and that we can dance at the fandango, and also attack the *casa* Garcia with good promise of success."

Duke gave a quick glance around the circle of bandits, and then fastened his eyes in deep scrutiny upon the speaker, a hundred thoughts rushing in a torrent through his brain. At last he spoke:

"You are Cortina!"

This he asserted, in a decided tone, not questioning.

"*Silencio*, *Senor Dudley*! That name must not be spoken in my presence, this side of the Rio Grande, unless I order it. However, I admit that you speak true. I am Cortina, the Scourge; a hater of Texans. But it pleases me to spare your life, as long as you obey my orders. Lead on, therefore; we follow!"

Turning to his band, the chief ordered:

"*Vamonos, compadres! Vamonos soldados del Bravo!*"

Duke Dudley turned his horse about, without a word, for he now knew full well the character of those in whose power he suddenly and unexpectedly found himself. And he knew, besides, that the least show of hesitation on his part to obey orders would seal his doom on the instant.

He cursed himself mentally, a hundred times, for having made an idiot of himself, throughout the whole time that he had been in San Antonio.

There was no piece of madness that he could have done which would have so much set the citizens against him, as the way in which he had treated Celesta Garcia.

He could not have been humiliated and disgraced in their eyes so much, in any other manner, than by being lashed and lassoed by the young Castilian as he had been; and he, all the while, with deadly weapons in his hands.

He could not have placed himself in a worse position, and one through which he was liable to be outlawed and hanged, than by riding into the midst of the scouting and invading party of Cortina.

Duke knew that if the band came in contact with any Texans, and he was recognized in the company of the bandits, that his life

would not be worth a picayune. Yet he could not escape.

So he led the way over the river, the outlaw chief close behind him, and the band winding snake-like, in single file. In this way Duke Dudley guided the desperate horde west through the mesquites, for a long distance, leaving the walls and gardens of Casa Garcia to the north.

In a little time all were within sound of the music of the fandango, and Duke begged to be permitted to remain concealed with the main portion of the outlaws, only six accompanying Cortina.

His request was granted; for the bandit chief knew that the Texans, should there be any present, would shoot Dudley at a moment's notice, upon perceiving the character of those in whose company he was.

A blaze of light shone from the door of Madame Candeliro's fandango-house, the most celebrated of any establishment of its kind in Western Texas; or, for that matter, in the whole United States.

That there was a motley crowd inside, the outlaw chief knew at a glance; for the doorway was blocked by Mexicans, some standing outside, and all peering in, and of course ignorant of the approach of any persons from the chaparral, which extended for half-a-mile to the suburbs of San Antonio, there not being a dwelling in all this distance, the mesquites being sufficient to afford shelter from observation for an army of men.

Notwithstanding the apparent jam of human beings within, the noted bandit chief hesitated, not, believing fully, and with good reason, that he bore a charmed life, for, in all the fierce conflicts in which he had been engaged, he had ever escaped most miraculously without a scratch.

There were fourteen indictments against him for murder, or killing his man, previous to his having adopted the life of a bandit.

The outlaw now pushed through the mass of people at the door, and stood a moment in the blaze of light, the observed of all observers.

Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande, was, as he had often boasted he would be, in the fandango-house of San Antonio de Bexar!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SCOUT OF DONALDSON'S RANGERS.

WHEN Old Rocky and his friends returned to the Plaza Bar they found Lingsweider engaged in an examination of the shattered mirror, varying it by grumbling and muttering curses upon Duke Dudley.

The glass could only be replaced by sending to New Orleans, and at great expense.

When Old Rocky and Jack beheld George thus contemplating the destruction caused by the crazed planter they burst into a roar of laughter, which was echoed by the crowd who followed them.

"Vot you makes mit me, Rogky?" asked the bar-keeper, turning as he spoke and coloring up.

"You dinks dose lugin'-classes crows on dose mesquite pushes? By tam, I shutes dot Duke mit a tubble-parrel'd poot-shack ef he does not bay Jarley Pyron five hunderd tollars! Vare vos dot vild man? You hears me vot I say, don't it?"

Lingsweider walked slowly around behind the bar as he spoke, his hands thrust into his pockets, his sleeves rolled up above his elbows, then he turned, and leaning upon the counter he gazed somewhat contemptuously upon the main portion of the crowd, and especially so at those who had been eating and drinking with Duke Dudley, previous to the mad performance of the latter.

Old Rocky and Jack, with the others, were examining the mirror, but soon faced the bar.

"Vell, shendlemens, please nomernate dot b'ison," said Lingsweider, with the air of one who was thoroughly bored. "I don't vos shove one trink over dot par, since you all sdambedes over dot San Bedro. Vy didn't dot Juke and Garlos vite like shendlemans on dot Blaza, und not break mein leedle pizness? Dare vos von man comes in for a cigar vot looks like dot Juke, und he vants ter know vare vos dot tuel come off. Tid you see dot man, Auld Rogky?"

"Ya-as, we-uns see'd him I r ckon. Yer see, George, thet leetle gal, arter she war tuck hum, kinder suspicioned thet her brother war goin' ter fight ther Dudley cuss, an' so she crawled on her crittur an' glided over San Pedro, way on ther skute. Somebuddy must ha' told her ther particks, an' she roved, I reckon, 'bout the time thet Carlos 'peared ter be shot, an' thet kinder made her wild."

"Yer'll hardly know ther Dudley cuss ef yer sees him ag'in, George, fer he got a welt 'cross ther face with a quirt which hev marked him. Sides which he war snatched bald-headed by a sling of a lasso."

"Tunder und blitzen!" exclaimed the bar-keeper, in a rage. "Haf dot Garlos gilled dot Juke? If he haf, he bays me for dot lugin'-class!"

All burst into a roar of laughter, Old Rocky saying, as the boisterous mirth subsided:

"Duke Dudley hain't passed his chips in yit, George. He don't die so easy. But he's laid

out on ther perrarer es docile es any dead man yer ever see'd. Howsomever, he'll soon flicker back ter biz, I reckon, though I'm a-gamblin' thet he won't hev so much extry vim about him.

"But set 'em out, George. We're all dry 'nough ter spit cotton. Suck tumblers lively, boyees, fer I'm a-thinkin' ther night ain't a-goin' ter pass without another circus o' some sort. What does yer s'pose, Jack? Doesn't yer 'pear ter feel es though thar'd be more fun afore sun-up?"

"I never know'd hit ter fail, old pard," replied Jack. "When biz commences ther way it hes ter night, thar's more on ther p'ogramme. When a buckle breaks on my team I'm a-spectin' a wheel ter fly, a hoss ter gi'n out, er ther king-pin ter snap, afore I strike another station. Straight whisk, George!"

"Thet's me too," said the old scout, "an' yer ain't a-goin' ter make much off'n me this time, George, for I feels equil ter four fingers."

A line of men now extended the whole length of the bar.

"All set, boyees?" asked Old Rocky.

"All set!" was the reply, in chorus.

"Then hyer's to Celesty Garcia, the angel o' ther Alamo City."

A murmur of approbation ran along the row of drinkers as they raised their glasses to their lips, tossed off the fiery liquor, and set the tumblers back on the counter.

At this instant there came a series of wild whoops from the Plaza outside, mingled with a clattering of hoofs, and the next moment, before one of the listeners made a step to investigate, there shot into the bar, and across the floor of the same, a bony, miserable-looking burro, or jackass, its huge ears flopping up and down and upon its back, his feet curled up to avoid dragging, was a young man, who sat facing the rear part of the beast and gripping its tail as though it was a bridle-rein.

"Whoop-er-ree! Here we are, my long-eared friend! Fifteen minutes for refreshments!"

Thus yelled the rider, and the next moment the room resounded with laughter. But the new arrival paid no attention to the tumult; neither did he cast a glance toward the line of men past whom he darted.

The burro threw out its hoofs and slid forward a short distance, coming to a halt opposite the mirror, into which Duke Dudley had gazed when he rode in with Celesta Garcia in his arms.

Throwing one leg over the tail of the beast and the other over its head, at the same time half-revolving his body, the new-comer, sitting now in the natural position of a rider, his feet, however, resting upon the floor, tipped his sombrero to the back of his head and smiled placidly on the scene.

He was clad in buckskin, of Rio Grande make, as was also his fancy sombrero, and he wore a belt in which were suspended a Colt's army revolver and a bowie-knife.

His eyes were light blue, his hair was light brown and long, hanging over his shoulders, which were broad; in fact, his frame was well rounded, with every evidence of strength and agility, the latter being proved by his every glance and movement.

There was a comical look continually playing upon his countenance and in his eyes that would at once draw attention; and this, with the unmistakable honesty which shone from every feature of the man, caused nearly every one at first sight to feel that any true man would gain by his friendship.

The peculiar manner in which the new-comer had entered the Plaza Bar, repudiating all and everything except himself and his burro, together with his extraordinary actions and silent mental communing with himself, would have made an alligator laugh.

"Dog-gone my old Texas heart!" exclaimed Old Rocky, at length; "ef thar ain't Tom Clark! Tom, when did yer 'rove from ther chap'rells, an' how's things thet-a-ways? Glide up an' pour down some terrantal juice. Whar in ther name o' Crockett did yer pick up thet jack?"

"Don't ask me too many questions at once," said Tom, laughing, as he stood up, and grasping the burro by one ear, dragged the animal forward and allowed the beast to walk slowly and deliberately, its ears flopping most absurdly, out on the Plaza.

"Don't caterchise me too frequent, Old Rocky. Don't paralyze me an' mix me up. I doesn't know much, an' thet little 'll evaporate, an' I'll sneeze it all out, ef yer crawl my mental organization."

"Jack, howd'y? Boys, one an' all, I'm es glad ter see yer es ter strike clear water at Taylor's Wells! Lingsweider, shake! I'm a nomernatin' it, straight es a gar can skute."

Although a New York boy, born and reared—he was but nineteen at the time of which we write—Tom Clark used at times the same peculiar pronunciation and clipped words of the men with whom he associated generally; most of whom had never seen the inside of a school-house, and could not write their names.

Tom drank his liquor, and then requested Old

Rocky and Jack Hodge to accompany him in a walk, informing them that he had something to communicate.

The three were the next moment in the Plaza, which they crossed diagonally to the southwest corner, where a short street led to the Military Plaza.

During this walk all the incidents that had occurred in connection with Duke Dudley were detailed by the old scout; he disregarding the fact that Tom wished to give him important information.

However, the news imparted by Old Rocky was so interesting and startling that Tom Clark nearly forgot what he had intended to reveal; but as the trio turned the first street to the left, leading out from the Military Plaza and on through the mesquites in the direction of the fandango-house, he recollected that he had something of importance to say.

"Old Rocky," put in Tom, in a quick-spoken manner, "you asked me in the Plaza Bar what news I had from the Rio Grande. I answer you now, and in words that will startle you, or I'm mistaken—Juan Cortina, the Chaparral Cock, the Scourge of the Bravo, is north of the Rio Nueces!"

Jack and the old scout came to a sudden halt.

"I'm a-givin' it square, boys; and there's no mistake. He has but twenty or thirty cut-throats with him, and I'm puzzled to think what he has in view, to cause him to undertake such a desperate and dangerous trip, so far from his main command and the Rio Grande."

"How far did yer foller ther cuss?" asked Old Rocky.

"From below Rio Grande City to the Nueces above Oakville. There he took to the wagon-trail, traveling only at night, I reckon. His cuteness prevented me from being right at his heels, for five or six small wagon trains of citizens obliterated all trace of his party. However, I am inclined to think that they are now not far from San Antonio."

"Dog-gone ther chalk aig thet my ole gran'-marm's hen used ter squat on!" exclaimed the old scout.

"I'd give a dozen saddle hags ter know, dead sure, whar ther murderin' cuss air camped. Thar ain't many of ther ole boys roun' town, but we kin hustle up a party thet c'u'd kerral ther Chap'rell Cock, I reckon, ef we-uns know'd 'bout whar ther skute in on him. I'm bamboozled all ter flummux 'bout hit. I can't git hit through my ole head why he dar' glide this-a-ways; an' I'll sw'ar, ef anybuddy else hed tole me, I'd 'a' laughed in his face. Hev he hed time ter 'rove on ther San Antonio river?"

"I reckon he has. But I come jist a-pantin' an' a-kitin', an' broke my nag down afore I struck town, about a mile below Mission San Juan. Thet's what caused me to strike the Plaza on a pesky burro."

"Wa-al, what's ter be did, boyees? Dang'd ef ther hull town hedn't orter know the news, an' all ther pilgrims start ter hunt ther cuss! Whar yer goin' now, Tom?"

"I thought we'd better go to the fandango, and see if there are any suspicious looking Greasers there. If so, by following them when the dance breaks up, we might find out a thing or two—perhaps strike Cortina's camp. If we could corral the cuss, it would be a big thing for us and Texas."

"Yer jist kerrect, Tom; an' yer plan air a good one. What der yer say, Jack?"

"I hain't said anythin', but I'm thinkin' right smart. Tom's plan air ther only one that'll gi'n us ther leastest show ter trail ther Rio Granders. But hyer we air at ther fandango. I move we bucks at monte 'stead o' dancin'; then we'll hev a show ter size every yaller-belly what skips a foot."

"Thet's our game to a dot!" assented the old scout. "Less go fer ther kyards!"

In five minutes more, the three men were in the rear part of the fandango-house, deeply engaged, to all appearance, in the run of the cards at a monte table; but flashing glances whenever chance offered, and studying every Mexican in the building.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BANDIT IN THE DANCE.

THE floor of the fandango-house was but hardened clay, the room being illuminated by candles which were held in tin sconces along the sides of the building. The musicians were upon a raised platform, and a table for serving coffee and cakes was on one side of it, and a monte table on the other. The main entrance, or door most used, was on the east side of the *jacal*.

An old brush fence extended from the southwest corner, running northwest into the chaparral. This was constructed of mesquite bushes which are covered with sharp thorns, rendering it impossible to pass, except by a bound of four feet, directly over.

When Cortina, the bandit chief entered, the hall was crowded by a motley mass of both sexes, principally Mexicans; there being but a few German and American girls, who, however, queened it right royally over their less-favored sisters.

From the fact of their being such a large number of persons present, the object of the scouts was made much more difficult, and they did not observe the outlaw chief when he entered, for the reason of there being thirty of forty persons between them and the door, as well as from the fact that they were seated in low chairs at the monte table.

Cortina pushed his way immediately toward a pretty Texas girl, who was well known in San Antonio, by the name of Kitty Nolan; and, in a polite way, requested the favor of her hand in the next dance. Every one who noticed the entrance of the noted bandit, was filled with admiration; his commanding presence, elegant costume and arms, with his devil-may-care manner, at once riveting their attention.

One glance around the room sufficed for the outlaw chief to weigh and measure all who were present.

He knew well enough that he was on the brink of a volcano; but he was a fatalist, and believed that it was his mission on earth to war upon all Americans, in revenge for the forced appropriation, by the hated Gringos, of Mexican territory, and the devastation and death that were caused by the invasion of the United States army in the fair land of the Montezumas.

Kitty Nolan was not the girl who would refuse to dance with a *caballero*, such as now bent gracefully before her; and with a pleased and somewhat exultant smile, she placed her delicate palm in that of the bandit.

All in the room seemed suddenly to have been mesmerized, so to speak, from the moment Cortina entered; that is, all who caught a view of the man. A mysterious magnetism emanated from his glance and presence, that caused even the lawless horde of desperate assassins, the scum of Mexico, to be drawn toward, and bend before the will of this merciless man.

The orchestra now struck up a rapid Spanish waltz, and at the first twang of the guitars, the middle of the floor was cleared, all crowding together around the sides and ends of the building, as if by a mutual understanding, and not another man venturing to join in the waltz.

Never was a crowd more impressed, without a word having been spoken; such was the imposing presence, to say nothing of the reckless expression of the stranger, who whirled so gracefully over the hard earthen floor.

The eagle eyes of Cortina flashed suspicious glances toward the monte table as he whirled along the south end of the building; and he then perceived, for the first time, the three scouts, and began to feel that he had made a mistake in entering the fandango-house.

Well he knew the character of the trio, who were seemingly engaged in monte, but who shot frequent glances toward the clear space, without, however, being able to get a clear view of the outlaw who had joined in the dance.

Realizing that something unusual was in progress, Old Rocky arose slowly to his feet, and looked over the heads of those in front of him. But Cortina was watchful of his every movement, feeling sure that his dance must be shortened, and he forced to depart, or get riddled with bullets.

The six bandits whom he had detailed to accompany him he had ordered to remain outside, by the east door, and they would be of no assistance to him in escaping, rather they would be in his way if he made the attempt.

For a moment the old scout gazed upon the handsome couple before him; then he gave vent to his surprise in a wild and vengeful yell, at the same time jerking his revolver, and bounding through the crowd, crying:

"Terrantalers an' tiger cats! Ef thet ain't ther cussed Cortina, ther Chap'rell Cock, I hopes ter be a perforated pilgrim, an' never ag'in promernade ther perrarer! Whoop er up, Jack an' Tom! I'll chaw my ears off, ef ther condemned kiote gits ther skute on us!"

Tom and Jack were on their feet in an instant, and before the old scout had ceased speaking were, with "sixes" in hand, at his side, staring in amazement at the fast-whirling couple; and then all three sprung through the crowd at the same moment.

Had not Tom Clark asserted that the outlaw chief was in the vicinity of San Antonio, neither of his pards would have believed the evidence of their own senses, for such daring audacity was beyond human reason.

The bandit immediately detected the confusion, and heard the voice of the scout; knowing, therefore, that his life was in the greatest peril, he sprung for the west door, this being the one most free from the crowd.

The presence of so many people was all that saved Cortina from the bullets of the scouts. This, too, prevented the outlaw from opening fire, knowing, as he did, that there were many Mexicans present who were his friends, and who were liable to be shot down in their tracks.

The bandit released his hold on Kitty Nolan, at the same time drawing his pistol and yelling loudly:

"Viva el Mexico! Cortina el Ranchero bids you all adios!"

As he thus yelled a number of Mexicans crowded in between him and the scouts, proving

that he had not been mistaken in believing that he had sympathizers in the throng.

Springing to the threshold Cortina gave a peculiar cry, a signal to those of his followers on the outside.

Maddened to eager desperation, Old Rocky drew his bowie with a cry of fury, and thus succeeded in frightening back the crowd in front of him, while Jack and Tom, hearing the answering yells of Cortina, forced their way to the east door, whence they proceeded.

A very short time after the signal of the outlaw, as he darted over the threshold, the old scout caught sight of him, as he made a leap over the fence of mesquites.

Quick as a flash Old Rocky aimed his revolver and pulled the trigger. The sombrero of the outlaw flew from his head, pierced by the hastily-fired bullet, and then Cortina dropped behind the fence, and was lost to view, the old scout bounding rapidly after him.

At this moment a rattling fusillade of revolver shots sounded on the air from the south end of the fandango-house. Old Rocky dashed over the fence, and through the mesquites, toward the sound of conflict, the loud yells of his two pards indicating that they were now on the east side of the building.

Springing over the forms of three dead Greasers, the old scout, a moment after, bounded clear of the mesquites, to see a horde of horsemen galloping between Cortina and the Texans who had been at the fandango, and who, led by Tom and Jack, had succeeded in killing three of the bandits, and very nearly capturing the notorious chief himself.

Now, however, the tables were turned; and the old scout, as the Texans rushed back into the *jacal*, darted back among the mesquites, realizing that it was the height of madness to attempt to cope with such a force.

He paused only for an instant, to peep through the branches; and he then saw Cortina lead his horse into the road and mount. Then the old scout rushed like a madman, again vaulting over the brush fence, and into the east door of the fandango house, crying out:

"E-e-e-h—ho!"

This peculiar half-screech, half-yell, from Old Rocky caused the greatest commotion at the west door, and the next instant, knocking the Mexicans that stood in their paths right and left, Jack, Tom and the other Texans reached the side of the old scout, who merely waved his pistol over his head, as a signal, and again dashed out.

No sooner did Old Rocky break into the border of the mesquites, than he turned toward the north for about a hundred yards, then east, and in a very short space of time, every Texan who had been in the *jacal* was following close after the bandits, and crouching where the latter must pass, should they return toward the San Antonio River.

Not long had they to wait before the bandits came at headlong speed, evidently fearing they would soon be pursued by men from the town, who would be informed of their presence.

The scouts muttered curses, long and deep, as they saw that it would be impossible to get a shot at Cortina from their position; as a dozen of his followers were between the Texans and their chief.

"Don't nary one o' yer pull a trigger!" ordered Old Rocky. "They'd open up on us, an' clean us out dead sure, fer we hain't got no critters hyer, cuss ther luck! We'll hev ter skute arter 'em on ther sly, an' see how ter condemned hellyuns air arter this-a-ways. Ef we hed nags, we'd stan' some show. Dang my ole heart, ef ther devil don't favor the cuss of a Cortina every time!"

"Wa-al, I'll jist sw'ar!" said Jack. "I'm totally bamboozled, ef thar ain't Duke Dudley 'mong ther yaller-bellies, a-ridin' cluss up ter thet cuss Cortina! Air yer gittin' blind, boyees, thet yer doesn't see him, with ther mark o' ther quirt cl'ar 'cross his face, like a streak o' red paint?"

All saw that Jack spoke true. At last Old Rocky spoke:

"May I be die-sected by Piute papposes! May I be riddled ter death by dipper ducks! May I be hashed by alligator gars, and then sucked in by catfish, ef yer ain't keerect, Jack!"

"Thet dang'd Duke hes played his last keerd now; an' ef I doesn't tie ther rope that'll choke ther breath outen his dog-goned carkiss, I'm a perrarer promernadin' pervaricator!"

"Boyees, I'm sick es a hen with ther pip, ter think that I war borned in the same world w' sich a puserlaminous pup es Duke Dudley!"

"I'm bettin' all I'm worth," said Tom; "that, bad as he is, he'd give his ranch on the Guadalupe to be out of the crowd. He's a captive, boys!"

"Dang my ole peepers!" exclaimed the old scout. "I b'lieve yer right, Tom; an' I'm or-mighty glad ther cuss ain't no worse nor he is."

"Hit strikes me, pards," put in Jack, "thet this biz air a leetle mixed. Thet crowd air p'intin' fer Casa Garcia, I'm dead sure."

As he spoke, the band disappeared among the mesquites at a rapid gallop, and Old Rocky sprung to his feet, saying in alarm:

"Dang'd ef I ain't afeerd ye're right, Jack! Come on, boys. Hit looks suspicious. Ef thar hain't bloody biz ahead, I'll chaw snakes an' bugs fer grub ther nex' six moons. Come on! Carlos an' ther leetle gal mus' be saved, ef thet's thar game. They hes hed hellish doin's pasted onter 'em tew thick a'ready in my 'pinion."

With six-shooters and bowies in their hands, eyes fixed ahead, and teeth set in mad, desperate determination, all rushed through the dense thicket, and along the course that had been taken by Cortina, the Chaparral Cock, and his dastardly band of assassins.

CHAPTER XII.

SHOT ON THE THRESHOLD.

WHEN Carlos saw the fiendish face of Duke Dudley at the window, he drew his revolver, determined to kill the young planter, and regretting now that he had not used his pistol, instead of the lasso, in the duel.

His movement, however, was useless, for Duke had escaped.

Celesta, too, recognized the ruffian, and clinging to the arm of Will Wild, at the report of the pistol, she stood thus for some time, being nearly overcome by the shock.

By Will also, Duke Dudley was instantly recognized; but more from the livid mark upon his face than aught else, for the man had changed much since his visit to his old home. But he would not have dreamed that the face at the window was that of the man upon whose trail he was, had not Carlos previously explained to him what had occurred at the first onset on the plain.

The alarm, mingled with deep concern, that ruled the minds of Carlos and Will for the moment, was occasioned by their deep solicitude and anxiety on account of the poor girl, who had already been so shocked, that she was in danger of nervous prostration.

No sooner did the exultant yell of Duke Dudley strike their ears, than Carlos and Will hurried Celesta from the room into the hall; Juanita rushing to receive her young mistress, and crying with terror.

Relinquishing his sister to the care of the maid, with quick delivered orders for her own apartment, Carlos, accompanied by Will, dashed out of the door, and around the *casa*, guided by the sound of Antonio's voice; the man, who stood by the stable, and directed their attention toward the river.

They were just in time to see Duke Dudley spur his horse at terrific speed into the pecans that bordered the stream; and Carlos then knew that it was useless to follow, for the time spent in getting horses equipped would enable the young planter to get beyond pursuit.

Will, whose horse was already saddled and bridled, immediately resolved that he would follow; but he was dissuaded from so doing by the urgent appeals of Carlos, who begged him to stay and assist in the defense of the *casa*, should Duke return, as was not unlikely, with some of his dissolute and desperate companions.

This appeal he could not resist; he, therefore, concluded to remain, secreting his horse in a thicket.

Notwithstanding what he had urged, Carlos had not the remotest idea that Duke Dudley would return. In fact, he decided, in his own mind, that the young planter, in his intense rage and generally demoralized condition, would feel confident that he had slain the man who had degraded him with the lash; not being able, in the fitting moment in which he had gazed into the room, to distinguish between a real person and the reflection.

He knew that Will, if he dashed after Duke, would be in deadly danger from the latter, who knew the lay of the land, while Will knew nothing whatever of it.

The young Castilian now directed Antonio to secure the stable door, and also the outer gate, and then repair to the front of the *casa*, and await orders.

Carlos and Will then returned to the room they had so recently vacated, closed the heavy oaken shutters, and then examined the shattered mirror.

"*Santissima Maria!*" exclaimed Carlos. "Who would have supposed that the miscreant would have dared attempt to assassinate a man in his own *casa*?"

"I judge, Senor Garcia," replied Will, "that Duke Dudley is now desperate, and insanely furious; and that, to the extent that he will seek revenge for the degradation and disgrace you have so justly heaped upon him, in any cowardly manner that may be open to or suggest itself to his brutal mind. You cannot be too prudent; and I greatly fear that, when he ascertains that he has not killed you, he will seek to torture you through your sister. I am extremely anxious in regard to her. She has suffered greatly, and has my deepest sympathy."

"That Duke Dudley will abduct, or attempt to abduct her, I have not the slightest doubt; but you can command my services at any and all times."

"Henceforth, it is war to the knife between the miserable scoundrel and myself; and I have it in my power to make him a beggar!"

Carlos straightened up from his examination of the bullet-hole in the mirror, and said, in surprise:

"Senor Wild has met Senor Dudley before to-night?"

"Yes, Senor Garcia," was the reply; "I have not only met him, but I know his whole history, which, by the way, has been a most discreditable one. But I have not seen him before, in several years. However, I am not at liberty to explain myself to you, any more fully at this time; but you will know all before very long. I will merely say that I am not related to him by any ties of blood; although many, in days gone by, have mentioned a strong resemblance between us."

"I was greatly struck myself, at the moment I first saw you," said Carlos, "by the resemblance you speak of. You are of the same height and build; but there the resemblance ends, for the expression of your face is just the opposite of Senor Dudley's."

"I beg of you not to think that I wish to pry into your secrets, my friend; and I thank you for the sympathy and devotion you have expressed. Let us have a glass of wine and a lunch, and then I will ascertain how my sister is. I will order Antonio to stable your horse."

"I am agreeable to all, except in regard to my horse," said Will. "If you will ask Antonio to slip the bridle, and give the nag about forty feet of a slack lariat on the edge of the thicket, my mind will be at rest in that direction. I am, I assure you, in no hurry to leave your agreeable company; but I confess frankly, that the events which have already occurred, and the suspicion that the end is not yet, influences me much toward remaining a little time with you."

"I assure you that your words gratify me very much," said the other; "and I feel highly honored by your company, and well chosen friendship. Consider this your home, and all here at your service."

As the young man spoke, he replenished the wine glasses, and the two drank confusion to the cowardly Duke Dudley, who was, as they thought, wandering the dark bottom timber, and doubtless concocting some fresh villainy by way of revenge.

Had they known his real position at that time, they would have been more dumfounded than when the report of his revolver almost deafened them in the parlor; for the young planter, at that very moment, was standing in front of the deadly tubes that were handled by Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Bravo!

Poor Celesta's maid now brought the intelligence that her young mistress could not sleep, so overcome was she with presentiments of some coming evil.

Juanita sung to her, and the two sat in the music-room conversing upon the events of the evening and night; the maid horror-stricken at all that her mistress had passed through, and calling upon all the saints in rotation to guard her in the future.

Carlos returned to the parlor, bearing the compliments of his sister to Will, and her thanks for his kindness and solicitude; and the two, so recently met for the first time, but who were as free and friendly as if they had been acquainted for years, enjoyed their Havanas and conversed pleasantly upon various topics, little dreaming that Duke Dudley with a horde of Rio Grande bandits, the infamous Juan Cortina at their head, was galloping with headlong speed and murderous purpose toward Casa Garcia.

Cunning and experienced as was the bandit chief, he being well aware of the skill and bravery of the noted scouts who had, unluckily for some of his followers, been in the fandango-house; he little thought that the resolute Texans were coming fast in his rear—indeed, almost as fast as his own band could travel, after striking the densely overgrown plain where the cattle-paths wound here and there.

Old Rocky knew every inch of the ground, as did Jack and Tom; and making Casa Garcia their objective point, they covered the ground at a rapid rate.

Cortina had made up his mind that the scouts had hidden in the fandango-house until his departure, and then hastened to San Antonio for horses and help.

They would, in this event, be forced to run a mile on foot, and then spend much time before they could be ready for a start. Then a mile must be covered before they could take up his trail, which they would find it impossible, he believed, to follow in the night.

Had he known that the Texans had seen Duke Dudley riding in his company, and that, arguing from this their destination and object, they were now on a wild run toward the home of the Garcias, he might have felt less secure in his own mind.

Old Rocky knew that his party was not sufficient in number to attack Cortina openly, and he was therefore bent upon a surprise or an ambush; fully determined, however, to give battle should the outlaws gain entrance to the gardens of the young Castilian.

He also knew that it would be useless to send for help to the town, as the hour was late and reinforcements could not be got ready in time.

to prevent any outrage Cortina might have in view.

Upon reaching the vicinity of Casa Garcia, guided by Duke Dudley, Cortina and his horde of cut-throats slackened their pace, and approached the wall that surrounded the gardens with caution, being greatly disappointed at finding the large gate closed.

But the wall was of adobe, and easily scaled; there being trees growing upon either side, and the cacti, which prevented the same from being surmounted in more dangerous days, having been removed to remedy in a measure the prison-like aspect of the establishment, the nearness of which to the town gave good grounds for supposing it to be safe from attack by Indians or bandits.

A few low but decisive orders from the outlaw chief, and two-thirds of his men dismounted, the remainder being directed to hold the horses of all; Cortina, however, securing his own steed, with that of Duke Dudley, in a thicket of mesquites some distance removed from the animals of the main command.

These preparations having been made, the bandit chief gave directions to his men to follow him at a given signal; and then, springing up into the branches of a tree, the next instant he stood upon the top of the wall.

Only for a moment stood he thus. The next, his revolver was jerked and leveled. A sharp report sounded on the night air, followed by a yell of agony, and the faithful Antonio fell dead upon the door-stone of his master's house.

CHAPTER XIII.

A REIGN OF TERROR.

THE report of the revolver fired by Cortina, and the dying shriek of Antonio, were heard within the *casa*.

Celesta Garcia sprung from her chair in horror, while Juanita fell upon her knees, praying wildly in terror.

Carlos and Will looked calmly into each other's eyes, as they drew their revolvers, both so dazed by the sudden and undreamed of interruption to their conversation that, for the moment, they were chained to the spot.

Well they knew, or interpreted, that long-drawn cry of agony which proceeded from the front entrance, where Antonio had been posted as guard.

Both felt sure that the poor fellow had been mortally wounded, and also that the dastard deed had been committed by Duke Dudley, who, they reasoned, had sneaked back in the darkness for the purpose of murder.

Not only this, but they felt positive, that he was now lying in wait for any who might open the door, in order that he might, if possible, assassinate them.

Not for a moment, however, did they dream that a band of outlaws were scaling the walls a moment after the fatal shot had been fired.

"Come, Carlos! We must act," said Will, firmly. "Lead on to the roof. If we open the door we will be shot."

With a furious glitter in his eyes, the young man did so.

And out among the mesquites, west from the *casa*, panting with exertion, but running as if life and death depended upon their speed—as in fact it did—were Old Rocky, Jack, Tom, and half-a-dozen Texans, to whom the report of the revolver was an incentive to greater action, all knowing whence it proceeded.

Some thousand yards had they yet to run, but the Texans passed rapidly over the ground, at times bounding high over the low bushes in their path.

The smoke had not curled out from the revolver of Cortina, before nearly a score of his desperate followers were upon the wall, and the next moment were in the garden.

The bandit chief knew that what he did must be done at once, and also that he and his command were now in a most perilous position.

He had resolved to assist Duke Dudley through policy, in abducting Celesta, for he thought that he could afterward make use of the man in his raids into Texas, knowing from what he had seen of the young planter, that the latter was a desperate and unprincipled rascal, who would stoop to any crime, however cowardly and revolting—just the man, in short, that he wanted for the lowest description of his work.

Thus far no other sound had broken the stillness.

Soon, however, rung out the imperative orders of the bandit chief, and half-a-dozen men rushed to the stable, crushing in the door with a heavy piece of timber, used by order of Cortina, as a battering-ram.

Strong as the door was, it fell inward with a crash, and a yell of exultation arose from the assembled Greaser outlaws.

But just at this moment, as Cortina, with Duke Dudley at his side, was about to bound into the doorway, the Texas yell broke on the air, from the mesquites beyond the wall, followed by a fusillade of revolver shots, mingled with blood-curdling cries of agony and death.

Old Rocky and his pards were on hand, and Cortina began to realize that his position was a perilous one indeed. It looked desperate. Re-

inforcements, he supposed, had been secured from San Antonio; but yet, he had no idea of abandoning his project. He was resolved more than ever not to return without booty to the Rio Grande.

Calling out to his men about the door to remain and prevent the Texans from entering the gardens, the outlaw chief sprung within, followed by Duke Dudley, and at the moment of their entrance, Carlos and Will sprung to the breastwork wall, and opened fire with their revolvers.

It was one continuous flash of flame for some moments, both men pulling trigger as quickly as they could cock their weapons. Twelve shots were fired before the bandits recovered from their astonishment, or had time to fire a shot in return. Many fell dead, while groans and shrieks of agony filled the air.

The survivors were now, in their dread and horror, more demoralized and terrified by another wild yell, which mingled with the cries of the desperately wounded men upon the opposite side of the wall.

Quickly turning their heads, and now almost helpless from the absence of their leader, they were doubly appalled by the appearance on the top of the garden wall of a line of Texans, who immediately opened fire upon them.

Only a few had sufficient presence of mind to return the galling fire, and the next moment, with cries of horror, as the scouts sprung inward from the wall, the survivors—about half the number who had followed their chief—fled around the *casa* toward the river, knowing full well that their doom was sealed if they lingered longer in their flight.

They had no hopes of ever again seeing their leader. The career of Cortina had, as they thought, come to an end, and they, without horses to flee upon, must steal through the timber in a starving condition, and perhaps be hunted like dogs and slain on the way.

Thus all the survivors of the raiding party fled in terror, on foot, leaving their chief surrounded by furiously mad Texans, penned up in a *casa* where everything was strange to him.

From one room to another rushed Cortina and Duke Dudley, the latter coming suddenly into the parlor, where, upon the side-board, sat the bottles of wine from which Carlos and Will had been drinking. Cortina ran hurriedly to the further end of the room in search of a door, deciding that whatever men had been in the *casa* at the time of the alarm must have been in this apartment. Duke, however, no sooner saw the bottles, than he darted to the side-board and filled a glass to the brim, which he tossed off with frenzied eagerness. Another followed, and while he was in the act of replacing the glass he caught sight of the shattered mirror for the first time.

At once the previous mad shot he had made in the Plaza Bar was recalled to his mind, and he quickly glanced across the room and saw there was a window, now concealed by an inside shutter.

A most bitter curse burst from his lips, for he now saw that he had been again deceived by a reflection, and that Carlos Garcia was not killed.

A rush of superstitious thoughts flashed through his mind.

He was forced to the conclusion that his luck had left him, that the Fates were against him, and that dishonor and death had, since the previous evening, been on his trail. A chill of dread, a presentiment of death in some horrible form came upon him, and just then the Texan yells, the groans of anguish, the shrieks of terror filled the air, mingled with the rattling and irregular fusillades of revolver-shots. At the same time Cortina, pistol in hand, rushed toward him, the bandit's face filled with a look of fiendish and murderous desperation, as he yelled:

"*Vamonos!* They have us corraled! They are shooting my men like dogs, and they will hang us from the water-spouts of the Casa Garcia. Show that you are a man, or I will bury my *cuchillo* in your heart! Celesta Garcia goes with Cortina to the Rio Bravo, or the Chaparral Cock will die in his tracks, breast-high with dead Texans!

"*Vamonos, I say! Follow me who knows how to lead out from deadly dangers unscathed!*"

Duke Dudley's face, all except the livid mark upon it, became deathly pale, his lips quivered, and seizing a bottle, he poured fully a pint more of the wine down his throat. He then followed Cortina, who rushed from the parlor into the hall. One glance revealed to him the desperate situation of his affairs.

He well knew that his little raiding party was doomed, and that he himself could not escape, unless in some as yet undetermined manner.

Already half of his men were either dead, or wounded, and he felt sure that those whom he had left to guard the horses had either been slain or forced to flee for their lives into the mesquites. There was only one way to save himself. That was to close the badly shattered door, and to place heavy furniture against it, in order temporarily to prevent entrance, and thus enable him to carry out his plans, which he was now resolved to do, or else die in the attempt.

In this he succeeded, Duke Dudley working in a wild and desperate manner to erect the barri-

cade. Then they both darted back along the hall and up the stairway.

Carlos and Will, after emptying their revolvers at the Greasers, were so struck by the horrible sight beneath them, and at witnessing the overwhelming dash of the scouts into the midst of Cortina's followers, that they leaned over the adobe wall from the roof, their eyes following the mad flight of the surviving bandits, their minds relieved from a most heavy weight of anxiety, but still greatly puzzled and perplexed in regard to the possible object of a party of Mexicans in attacking Casa Garcia—a party, to all appearance, without a leader.

That they were outlaws they were both satisfied, and also that they must have committed some daring outrages in San Antonio, or the scouts would not have been on their track. Another thing greatly mystified them. This was that the front door had been burst inward, and yet the bandits had not taken refuge in the *casa*.

But these last enigmas were soon to be explained. Will Wild, drawn by some subtle fascination, born, it may be, of his fears for the safety of Celesta, leaned back from the wall and gazed toward the trap-door, through which he and Carlos had gained the roof.

At this very moment a hand grasping a revolver was thrust upward, resting on the side of the trap; and no sooner did Will discover this than he knew in an instant that others had gained entrance to the *casa*—perhaps even Duke Dudley himself!

Not only this, but Will knew that he and his friend were now at the mercy of whoever he was who was coming upon the roof; for they were without a load in their revolvers.

Mounting quickly upon the wall, Will jerked Carlos to his side without ceremony; he then threw himself over, clinging to the edge of the wall until his feet rested upon a water-spout.

The noise below prevented any explanation in words, for the air was filled with shrieks and groans, and the exultant yells of the scouts who had now returned from a short and fruitless chase after the fleeing outlaws. Will merely pointed toward the trap-door as he clung to the edge of the wall, and Carlos then saw a sight which caused him to quickly follow his friend's example; for by this time Cortina was stepping upon the roof, and the now hideous face of Duke Dudley was rising above it—both men clutching their revolvers!

Luckily for Carlos the bandit chief stumbled as he stepped upon the roof, and came near falling prostrate; a circumstance that prevented him from at once sweeping the roof with his eagle gaze, and which also drew the attention of Dudley. It enabled Carlos, however, to throw himself out of view on the side of the wall.

"*Santissima Maria!*" exclaimed the young Castilian. "I am forced to think, Senor Wild, that Hades has emptied its legions upon Casa Garcia! Did you see Dudley?"

"I saw nothing but the hand of a man grasping a revolver," was the answer; "and I knew he could shoot us down like dogs before we could close in with our knives. Did you see the man's face, and do you know him to be that dastard? It seems we will be forced to hang him after all. But he is now at the mercy of our friends below."

"I believe, as you say, that he is doomed this time; that his race is run, and not only must he die, but the most notorious bandit America has ever known, who is in his company, must die with him. We have escaped death only by a hair's breadth!"

"You surprise me, Senor Garcia! Of whom do you speak?"

"Of none other but Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande! This chief of assassins and robbers, fit companion for Duke Dudley, is now on the roof with him!"

"You astonish me! I never was more amazed in my life! The occurrences of this night are horribly marvelous and appalling. If they approach this way we are even now as good as dead men. We must in some way reach the branches of these trees or we will be butchered. Do you think it possible for them to burst in the door of your sister's room?"

"If I did I should be made desperate and insane with anxiety. *Madre de Dios!* If they harm one hair of her head I will cut out their hearts! Come, Senor Wild, I can remain inactive here no longer. Your words have caused my blood to boil with apprehension. We will do as you propose. We must gain the ground, and then direct the scouts to guard the *casa* by surrounding it. Then we can follow the miscreants to the roof, there we can either capture them or force them to leap from the wall, when they will be riddled by the bullets of our friends."

As Carlos ceased speaking a taunting, fiendish laugh sounded from overhead, mingled with an exultant oath. This was followed by a blinding flash. The hands of Will Wild and Carlos Garcia slipped from the adobe support, their feet no longer clung to the water spouts, and both the young men fell down into the dark thicket below, at the base of the *casa* wall, as if stricken with death!

CHAPTER XIV.
THE CLOUD THICKENS.

BUT a few moments had elapsed, at the time Cortina and Duke Dudley sprung upon the roof, since the former had thought his condition a desperate one. Soon his hasty decision was reversed.

He began to believe that, as surely as the sun would arise in the morning, he would again muster his horde of desperadoes on the Rio Grande; again yell his derisive, taunting battle-cry on the Bravo.

Believing as fully in predestination as ever did Napoleon, and that he had a mission of vengeance which it would take years to perform, he had not the remotest idea that the hemp was grown, or the bullet molded, or the knife tempered, that would cause his death.

Desperate, daring and cunning, and withal gifted with remarkable strategic talents, he did see, nevertheless, that it would take all the powers of the Fates to get him out of the predicament he now found himself in.

One sweeping glance told Cortina that the men he had supposed to be on the roof were not there; yet he was conscious that, as he had stumbled forward, he had detected a flutter, or movement of something, from the corner of his eye, to his left.

Snooping low, in order that he might cause the west wall to be outlined against the moon-lit sky, the outlaw's face became convulsed with exultant cunning, for the hands of Will and Carlos were discernible, clinging to the edge of the wall, and forming a break in the evenness of the line of it. Giving a gesture to his companion to follow, the bandit chief stole quickly along the roof, Dudley at his side, and peered over the wall. There he saw the two young men, standing on the water-spouts, and completely at his mercy.

Both pointed their revolvers downward; but the sight of the Texans, who might, at any moment, discover them, and the awful and bloody scene below would have affected the nerves of any one.

Pulling triggers, almost without aim, they fell back instantly; realizing, when too late, that they had betrayed their presence on the roof of the *casa*, to the infuriated Texans below.

Cortina ran in great haste, and dashed in the most reckless manner down the stairway; so hastily indeed, that he fell heavily forward at the landing, against a door, which was burst open by the shock, and the bandit found himself in the music-room, which bore many evidences of the recent presence of its occupants.

Duke Dudley bounded hurriedly into the room, his face betraying his terror, for he expected no less than that the Texans would hang him to the nearest tree; but a look on the face of Cortina somewhat reassured him, and looking around, he saw that they were in one of the apartments of Celesta.

There was no time to lose, however; for already could be heard the shouts of the Texans, and the crushing of the furniture that constituted the barricade.

Cortina quickly closed and secured the door, by which he and Duke had entered. He then pointed significantly toward an opposite door.

This was the entrance to the chamber of the fair girl, who had already suffered the agony of death; and who now knelt in prayer, supposing that her brother had been slain, and believing that the best which was in store for her, was that she might soon follow him to the unseen world.

Who they were that had attacked the *casa*, she knew not, but she fully believed them to be the drunken hirelings of Duke Dudley.

Poor Juanita was so prostrated by terror, that she was entirely helpless; but when the presence of some persons in the adjoining room became known to her, she supposed, from there being no disturbance, that Carlos and Will had been driven from the lower portion of the *casa*, and had come now to defend her mistress and herself.

This was a very reasonable supposition, especially when the girl, having listened, heard the stealthy footsteps of but two men. She resolved, therefore, to open the door, not daring to call out, for fear of further alarming her young mistress, whose terror seemed to have deprived her of speech and motion.

Cortina directed Duke to examine the windows at the lower end of the room; and, as he approached one at the side, he found, much to his joy, that a large tree grew near it, the branches scraping the wall of the *casa*, and the main limbs being within such a short distance that one could easily bound from the window-sill upon them, even when burdened.

Grasping one of the iron bars, which, in the upper story were not connected by cross-bars, he exerted his powerful strength to the utmost, and bent the bar like a bow, causing the ends to fly out from the *adobe* walls.

This was done in an instant, and while Duke was at the west end of the room, examining the outlets in that direction. The latter saw at a glance that there was a chance there for escape; and as he gazed out on the dead and dying below, a man staggered from their midst, whose

features were as pale as death, where the streams of blood, from a wound in his head, did not hide the skin. Up to the window he gazed, with a look of agony. Even Duke Dudley shuddered, and his half upraised revolver fell back in his nerveless grasp as he strove to raise it, to again attempt the life of the man whom he so hated, and who had, as he now knew, escaped him when he before made the attempt. For Duke recognized him at a glance.

It was Carlos Garcia, who had been shot off from the projecting water-spout on the roof.

A tramping of many feet coming rapidly up the stairway, however, caused Dudley to turn about, nearly powerless this time, for he realized that escape from the maddened scouts was impossible.

But he was more amazed than ever by the strange sight which met his view.

This was Cortina, who now sprung to the window he had been examining, with a female form in his arms, placed his foot upon the sill, and then bounded out and was gone.

There was no lamp in the room, it being lighted only by the moon; and the noise made by the outlaw chief in wrenching the bar from its sockets had not been noticed by Duke, all his attention having been centered upon Carlos Garcia, the man who had publicly lashed him, degraded him, and then escaped his vengeance in so miraculous a manner upon four occasions.

His position now was perilous in the extreme.

The man, upon whom he had based his hope of escape, had deserted him; besides carrying off with him the maiden he himself had risked his life to gain, and whom he had sworn should be his.

Past the door and on up the stairs to the roof rushed the mob of Texans, to capture the men whom they had seen shoot Will and Carlos from the water-spout. Duke saw that it was now or never with him.

In a frenzy of madness, the young planter bounded toward the window; but, at the same moment, an angelic form appeared at the door of the next apartment—a form that was ethereally beautiful, a maiden whose lovely face was pale as death, whose eyes were filled with horror as she beheld Duke Dudley, with the livid mark across his bloated and brutal face!

The girl was speechless with terror. Duke grasped her tottering form in his fiendish clasp, as Celesta sunk senseless into his eager embrace.

Then, as if favored with a new lease of life, Duke Dudley sprung to the window, and from thence out upon the larger limbs, clutching a branch to sustain him as he jumped; and the next moment, as the door of the music-room was burst in by the scouts, he was entirely screened from view.

He then, in mad haste, descended the tree.

And now, Duke Dudley felt an exultation and a hope that braced him to superhuman efforts to escape, for the clump of flowering shrubs, at the base of the tree was free from the presence of any human being, proving conclusively that Cortina had made his way beyond this into some other thicket.

Seeing that the way was clear, he dashed on with his prize toward the dark shades of the river bottom.

In their excitement, the scouts had neglected to send men to prevent the escape of the men on the roof by way of the trees, this being the only point by which an escape could possibly be accomplished.

Duke Dudley now understood that the bandit chief had, in his haste, mistaken the maid for her mistress, and, if this was really the case, Cortina would, if they again met, demand an exchange.

Juanita, as has been stated, had resolved to open the door, fully believing that Carlos and Senor Wild were the persons who were walking about the music-room. This she had just done, at the very moment that Cortina approached the door for the purpose of breaking it in, and he, seeing the girl, who was really attractive, and was attired in a pretty costume, the gift of her mistress, made up his mind on the instant that Celesta Garcia was before him. Pallid and speechless as she was, it would have been difficult to believe that one who had not been gently reared could assume such a ladylike attitude and manner.

In any case there was no time to be lost in investigating had the bandit chief felt disposed to do so. But he knew of no young female companion of Celesta's; consequently, without a pause, he grasped Juanita and sprung into and down the tree, the affrighted girl going off in a dead faint at her helpless and hopeless position and condition.

The mind of Cortina had suddenly changed in regard to Duke Dudley upon the headlong advance of the latter into the music-room from the roof, for the nerves of the young planter were in a shattered condition for want of the fiery stimulants which he had used so copiously but a few hours before.

He was, in fact, incapable of taking care of himself, and he clung to Cortina like a frightened woman might have done, the wine he had drank not containing the amount of alcohol his system called for.

The very apparent cowardice that was mani-

fest by the actions and movements of Dudley disgusted the bandit chief, and caused him to decide to leave the Texan at the first opportunity to the tender mercies of the scouts.

That opportunity soon presented itself, as well as the chance—so, at least, the outlaw thought—to abduct the lovely Castilian girl on his own account. He therefore took advantage of both, escaping in haste to the shades of the timber that bordered the San Antonio River, which lay in an easterly direction from Casa Garcia.

Upon arriving at the river Cortina paused, and laid Juanita upon the sward within a thicket, he being now breathless from the excitement and exertion through which he had passed.

He was now in almost as dangerous a position as when in the *casa*, for the citizens of San Antonio were rushing in at the gate, and a searching party would no doubt soon be scouring the timber in all directions, while he had no horse to escape upon.

To be without a horse causes a Mexican to feel almost helpless, and Cortina determined not only to secure an animal, but to recover his own steed, that he had made fast to a mesquite in a thicket beyond the walls previous to the attack upon the *casa*.

No sooner did the bandit decide upon this than he acted. He immediately stole through the timber, and then leaving it under cover of the mesquites, and proceeding west some distance from the walls of the garden, he circled toward his coveted horse, upon which he felt that his life depended.

He knew that, once upon the animal's back, he could easily make his way to the spot where he had left his fair captive, and then cross the river and speed down the same some miles. He could then ford it, and strike for the Rio Grande, lying hid, if necessary, at different points on the Rio Frio, Nueces and in the chaparrals.

Luckily for Cortina, this movement was made at a time when the scouts were dumfounded, not only by the discovery that there were no men on the roof, but that the two females had been abducted.

The recently-arrived citizens were appalled by the ghastly proofs of the desperate fight, and the fact that Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande, had danced at the fandango, attacked Casa Garcia, and stolen the two maidens. Had the chief been ten minutes later he would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to have regained his horse, and he would, in all probability, have lost his life.

However, it was not recorded that he should lose either life or steed, for he succeeded not only in getting away with his own horse, but secured the noble black that belonged to Duke Dudley.

Then, by a circuitous route, he proceeded to the point at which he had left the supposed Celesta, fully determined to avenge the deaths of his followers in a manner that would not soon be forgotten, when he was once more at the head of his ruffian hordes on the Bravo.

CHAPTER XV.

PREPARING FOR VENGEANCE.

"WHOOOP-ER-UP, boyees! Whoop-er-up! I say, or ther hellyuns 'll knock things ter finders. I'm b'ilin' over with double-distilled prussic acid ole he hyderphobic! I c'd chaw a 'ole raw-hide inter saddle-strings! Whoop-er-r-r!"

Thus yolled Old Rocky, as he ran like a madman through every obstruction in his course, Jack and Tom close upon his heels, and the other Texans just behind them.

"Whoop-er-up it air, old pard!" yelled Jack Hodge. "Hyer we come, six in hand, makin' ther black snakes whiz an' zip! Hyer we come, with ha'r a-flyin' an' wheels a-hummin'!"

"Throw all yer vim an' chain-lightnin' inter yer kickers!" put in Tom Clark. "We're arter them like a blue streak, an' my fingers 'll be on-easy till I gits a show ter jark on a lariat, with Duke Dudley hitched ter t'other end!"

"Easy with chin music, boys!" continued the old scout. "Ef ther gate's shut, ther condemned yaller kiotes 'll hev ter climb over ther wall, an' we'll hev ther dead-wood on 'em, sure an' sartin. Ther's ther chimbleys now!"

"Whoop-er-up! an' don't 'low a Rio Grander ter straddle his nag ag'in! Hooray fer us, an' 'member ther Alamo!"

There was no chance for an equal body of men to resist with success that line of determined Texans, each one of them familiar with the use of arms from his childhood.

They sprung free from the mesquites, near the corner of the wall, to the north of the point where Cortina and his men had scaled it, and where the guard and horses were posted.

Here there was a clear space, some thirty feet wide, and down this the Texans rushed in a body, knife in hand and pistols grasped, the click of the latter sounding in the ears of the bandits, who stood holding the bridle-reins of their companions' horses, not daring to allow the animals to go loose, for fear of the anger of their chief.

However, there was no time for reflection, and that moment of perplexity to the bandit

guard was their last, for each of the Texans picked his man.

Few were left of these professional assassins that had sufficient life to utter even a groan, for the avengers had been close upon them before pulling a trigger.

No sooner had the Texans delivered their volley, which laid many of the bandits low, than, at the order of Old Rocky, they all sprung from the wall into the garden, two of their number being riddled with bullets from the Greasers and others seriously wounded, but those who were uninjured sprung forward, and then followed a terrible hand to hand conflict.

Revolvers cracked, steel clung to steel, fiery sparks flying from the same, as the blades glittered in the moonlight.

Soon the surviving outlaws dashed in wild flight in the direction of the San Antonio bottom, the Texans in hot pursuit.

The scouts, however, soon saw that it was useless to follow.

"Dang my ol' heart!" said Rocky, "we-uns hes swep' ther board! Hft war ther wo'stest break ther cuss Cortina—"

Here he stopped abruptly, but in a moment continued:

"Boyees, we're a pack o' idjets! I c'u'd gi'n myself a hefty kick with a good relish. Hyer we're a-wastin' time, an' I'm a-gamblin' thet Cortina an' thet or'nary scoundrel Duke Dudley hes skuted wi' Celesty! I plum' fergot all 'bout ther cusses in ther rush o' hefty biz. We-uns must 'vestergate things, an' ef thet angel hev bin tuck I shill chaw my tongue off wi' pure hyperphobic mad!"

"I ain't 't all bothered 'gards ther folkses inside," asserted Jack Hodge. "Since I see'd Carlos spread Duke Dudley out on ther perrarer ter dry I goes heavy on ther Castilyin. An' thet Wild, what tuck ther gal's crittur back this a-way, ain't no slouch, ef I'm a jedge o' human meat. I'd risk 'em both anywhar."

"An' ef they can't perfect theirselves an' ther wemin folkses ag'in' ther chap'rell cock an' Duke Dudley, why, thar's somethin' peculiarly wrong inside ther 'dobe walls."

"Cortina's a sly coon," said Tom. "He's full of his tricks; an' now that he knows his gang hes been wo'sted he'll be des'p'it roarin' mad, an' fight like a panther-cat."

"I'm incarnated ter think that he'll git ther drop on Carlos an' Wild, fer he's es sly es a 'Fache on his fust war-trail."

By this time the Texans had arrived at the scene of the fight, opposite the main entrance, but they were forced by the pleading cries of their wounded pards to attend to their wants before they looked to the situation of affairs within.

They were thus occupied when they heard the blended reports of the revolvers of Cortina and Duke Dudley, and turning about they saw Carlos and Will shoot downward from the water-spouts. They now knew that the chief, and perhaps others of the gang, were in the *casa*. Rushing therefore to the door in haste, Old Rocky shouted to his followers:

"Some on yer see ter Carlos an' Wild! They may be bad hurted!"

Provisionally for our two friends, however, the uncertain aim of Cortina and Duke had been such that the bullets merely struck the tops of their heads, rendering them senseless both falling straight downward, striking on the yielding body of Antonio, which had been thrown into the thicket by the bandits.

Both sunk forward, lifeless for the time, and those who were directed to attend to them supposed them to be really dead.

The shots and the fall of the two young men proved that enemies were upon the roof, and the scouts were soon bounding up the stairs in furious eagerness to kill or capture Duke Dudley and Cortina, who they felt sure were within the *casa* or the chief would have been with his band.

The shattered door and barricade afforded sufficient proof of this; but, as we know, they were doomed to be disappointed.

While upon the roof, Old Rocky ran around the edge of the same to ascertain if there was a possible way of descent, other than the one by which he had come; but there was none, except by way of the branches of the trees, which, at that very moment concealed Duke Dudley and his fair captive.

The windows of the music-room were but a foot above the floor, and the top of the tree had been trimmed in order not to destroy the view toward the town from the roof.

Quickly the old scout led the way back down the stairs, the citizens having passed within the gates in the mean time.

"Whoop-er-up, boyees! Search ther hull *casa*, an' find ther sneakin' cusses er I'll go b'ilin' mad!"

"We'll smash in ther hull consarn!" yelled Jack Hodge. "Down goes yer hosses, an' ther coach air wrecked!"

So saying, Jack threw himself against the door of the music-room, which gave way, and he fell headlong in a heap upon the floor—wrecked himself.

Old Rocky dashed in, followed by Tom Clark and others.

A pair of wax candles were still burning in the room of Celesta.

"Senorita Garcia!" cried out the old scout, in a voice that trembled with apprehension, "ef ye're hyer, speak ter ther ole man, what's allers bin yer bestest friend! Speak quick an' tell us ye're O. K."

Not a sound came from the deserted chamber.

Old Rocky reeled against the side of the room, a look of anguish in his face, as he said:

"Tom, glide in lively an' s'arch! I can't do hit. I'm weak as a suckin' pappoose, an' I'd sell out fer two bits."

Clark obeyed immediately. Soon he returned, saying:

"Thar ain't a human, male or shemale, in ther hull fixin's!"

The old scout pressed his hand for an instant over his eyes. Then he thrust his sombrero upon his head, and sprung for the door, yelling loudly to the citizens:

"Whoop-er-up, boyees! Ther Angel air tuck, sure an' sartin! Ther hellyuns air 'scaped ter ther woods!"

"Hold up!" cried out one of the Texans. "Hyers whar the dang'd cusses skuted outen ther winder."

Old Rocky paused but a moment. Then, realizing the importance of the discovery, he bounded out into the tree and descended, followed by Jack and Tom.

He knew, as soon as he reached the ground, that it was impossible to detect the trail of the abductors by moonlight; but there was no need, for he knew that those whom they wished to rescue had been carried from one thicket to another until the timber had been reached, and that amid the pecans and undergrowth it would be next to impossible to find them.

The three scouts, however, sped, revolvers in hand, immediately to the river-bottom, crossed the stream by springing from rock to rock, and soon gained the opposite bank. Here they searched the timber as thoroughly as circumstances would permit, but without discovering the least sign of those they sought.

They then held a consultation, which resulted in their deciding to collect a small party and proceed at once toward the Rio Frio, hoping to cut off the assassins on the prairies before they reached that river.

That Duke Dudley would ever again show his face in San Antonio, they did not believe. He had probably been recognized by Carlos and Will Wild, on the roof; and, even though he might feel that he had not been seen with the bandits by the Texans, still he could not be sure that either of the young men they had shot at had been killed.

This would now cause the young planter to adopt the profession most adapted to his character—that of a bandit; acting in conjunction with Cortina, the Scourge.

The scouts now returned to the *casa*, dispatching those of the citizens who were mounted to collect the horses of the outlaws, and others to remove the wounded and summon a surgeon forthwith to attend to them.

All was bustle for the time. Ready hands removed the dead. The wounded outlaws were disposed of by the infuriated mob, their ghastly corpses being left hung by lariats from the large mesquites near the wall on the outer side.

But we must leave the scouts for the present, preparing for a dash toward the Rio Frio, and follow up the dastards who were the cause of this bloodshed and outrage, including the abduction of two fair girls from their former quiet and happy home.

CHAPTER XVI.

A VISIT TO LINGSWEIDER.

CORTINA, with his own horse, and also that of Duke Dudley, succeeded in reaching the river, at a point south of where he had left his captive. Here he forded, and proceeded up the stream by a narrow path.

He knew full well that he could demand and receive a heavy ransom for the supposed Celesta, even were her brother killed, for the estates were of immense value, and her relatives would, without doubt, interest themselves.

Money was what he wanted. Indeed it was a necessity. The large body of men under his control must have the means of enjoying themselves when not on active duty.

While thus reasoning on the financial value of his fair captive, Cortina began to feel regret that he had left Duke Dudley behind; for he saw that he could make the young planter useful and profitable to him in many ways.

He could see now that Duke had not been himself, that unlimited indulgence in liquor had unfitted the man for passing through danger or excitement, as his nerves were in a sad condition. He did not believe the story told by Duke, in regard to his having been asleep on the plain when the young Castilian had struck him.

He felt assured that young Garcia had attacked, and lashed the planter in public in revenge for some insult offered to his sister. Indeed, Dudley had stated that Celesta, at one time, was in his power.

Thoughts of this character flashed through

the mind of Cortina, followed by plans of escape.

But we must now return to Duke Dudley, who made his way over the river with great difficulty, nearly falling into the stream with his fair burden, just as Cortina entered the thicket within which lay Juanita, previous to returning for his horse.

He soon detected the flutter of a white garment, and decided that the bandit chief had borne the Mexican girl to a hiding-place before regaining his beast, as it would be impossible for him to escape on foot.

He was at first furious, realizing that the outlaw chief had played him false, and he determined to outwit Cortina more thoroughly than the latter had yet been.

He resolved to remove Juanita from the thicket, knowing that the rage and disappointment of Cortina would be as deep as though he had really lost Celesta.

Watching the bandit chief as he s'ole away, Duke ran along a path to the outermost edge of the timber, where lay the unconscious girl. Securing her wrists together with a wide silk ribbon which he tore from her waist, in the same manner in which he had handcuffed her mistress; and then, fearing that she might recover, and make an outcry, he gagged her with his handkerchief, and claspings her in his arms, retraced his steps to where he had left Celesta. He took care, however, to secrete the maid some little distance from her mistress, whom he also took the precaution of gagging.

Duke was now filled with curiosity in regard to what might be going on at the *casa*. This feeling, and his extreme anxiety and fear, overruled for the time the terrible thirst for strong drink, although he was trembling in every limb, as if with palsy, from no other reason except the want of his accustomed stimulants.

He would give much to know if Carlos and the young stranger were really dead.

If he were positive that the scouts were ignorant of his having been with Cortina, he would have been relieved of a heavy load of apprehension. He would then have carried Celesta around the town, to its northern suburbs, secured a horse, and then galloped with his prize to his ranch on the Guadalupe.

But the more he pondered the more positive he became that Carlos was alive; for his bullet had evidently glanced, and the young *caballero* would soon be hunting him, this time to be satisfied only by his death.

Duke saw that his only sure hope lay with Cortina.

He must escape over the Rio Grande, or die an ignominious death at the hands of the infuriated Texans.

He must forfeit his property or lose his life.

While thus reasoning, Duke crawled nearer the river, and secreted himself in the bushes. The scouts came near, searching for him and Cortina, and their captives. Words cannot describe his terror, as old Rocky several times approached his covert on different sides. Each moment he looked to be dragged out, and hanged like a thief.

Great at last was his relief when the scouts gave up their search, and recrossed the river. He arose to his feet, but the same moment detected the approach of some four-footed animals, and he shrunk back.

The steps came from the river, and Duke was much relieved, although he knew not what would be his reception, when he recognized Cortina, who was mounted, and led his own noble black by a lariat.

Duke now supposed that the outlaw chief had expected him to escape from the *casa*, though, had his mind been cleared, he would have seen that Cortina intended to appropriate his steed to his own use.

However, he did not take this second thought, neither did he think of the fact that he had removed Juanita from the thicket where the bandit had placed her. He thought of nothing except that his life depended upon the friendship of this man, and he sprung forward to meet him; but the muzzle of the outlaw's revolver was thrust quickly against his forehead, and he was afraid to cry out, as spies might be lurking near them.

But the situation now called for words, and Duke spoke out in a husky and pleading voice:

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot, Senor Capitan! It is I, Duke Dudley, whom you left in the *casa*."

"Where is Senorita Celesta?"

This Cortina asked in a cold, stern voice, that had not the slightest ring of friendship. Duke then knew that the bandit chief had visited the thicket, and finding the girl gone, believed he had removed her.

He knew that nothing less than death awaited him if this belief became a certainty; and yet he dared not deceive Cortina, for the very good reason that, should the latter compel him to accompany him to the Rio Grande, Celesta could not be removed unless he revealed the whole truth of the matter.

For an instant only was Duke perplexed, and it was well for him that he answered as he did, or a bullet would have crushed through his brain. For, although in the habit of constantly deceiving others, he allowed no one to deceive him,

and Cortina was positive that Dudley had removed the supposed Celesta.

"The scouts came over the river," answered Duke, "and, as I followed you from the *casa* and saw you carry the girl and then depart with her, I knew you had left her in the thicket. When I discovered the scouts coming, I felt sure that they would find her, so I removed her to the eastern edge of the timber."

"It is well," said Cortina. "Senor Dudley will mount and lead on into the Plaza of San Antonio. If he turns to the right or left from a direct course, I know what to do."

With these words, spoken low, but with a deep meaning, the bandit shook his revolver in the face of Dudley, and then added, in a more friendly tone:

"Does Senor Dudley want some whisky?"

"I am dying for a drink!" said Duke, eagerly.

"Come, then; lead on! We will drink at the Plaza Bar, and then on to the Bravo with our fair captive. San Antonio will not be a healthy place for Senor Dudley after this night, and his gold will be counted by other hands. However, life is more precious than gold, and it is not pleasant to have one's breath choked out with a lasso."

Duke Dudley was thunderstruck. He hardly believed that Cortina really meant what he said, when he signified his intention of drinking at the Plaza Bar; but he dared not hesitate, and he felt that he could brave death in any form in order to procure that for which his stomach was torturing him.

"We shall be shot like dogs!" was all he ventured to say, as he mounted his horse. "The scouts thirst for our blood, and the city is alarmed!"

"Senor, I am not a fool!" said the bandit chief. "All who heard the sound of battle, and dared to go, are at Casa Garcia. I venture to assert that the streets and plazas are deserted. However, I care not. I shall drink at that bar, and also procure liquor for you to take on the trail. You will need a brace of bottles to give you nerve. Am I not right?"

The mere mention of liquor nearly drove Duke insane with craving, and he spurred forward, neither of the men speaking a word as they rode.

Following the route usually traveled by the wagon trains from the Gulf ports as they enter the Alamo City, this pair of merciless miscreants soon passed the Bull's Head, which was closed, next the Market House, and then entered the Main Plaza.

At the very moment that Cortina and Dudley came upon the Plaza, which they saw was quite deserted, a cloud passed over the disk of the moon, causing the very darkness of Egypt, as if to favor those who so recklessly entered a town, the citizens of which would have given fifty thousand dollars for the chance of securing Cortina's head.

But a short distance down the street, south, was a mob of maddened citizens, who had been drawn thither by the sounds of fight, and who were now attending to the wounded and burying the dead.

Yet neither of these two villains who had, through revenge, hope of gain, and selfish passion, caused all this bloodshed, misery, suffering, and death, felt a pang of remorse. They spurred on across the Plaza; one bent on satisfying his terrible craving for alcohol, the other merely to display his contempt of law, and daring to perform an act that would cause his ignorant followers and sympathizers to look upon him with more of wonder than ever before.

Although it was now long after midnight, the Plaza Bar was open; and Lingsweider, who had been for some time greatly excited, was now waiting anxiously, expecting to do a big business when the citizens returned.

As yet no one had come to inform him of the attack, or the character of those who had the audacity to commit such an outrage; but George connected it with Duke Dudley, and with good reason.

It was while the worthy bar-keeper was watching patiently in the doorway, that he heard the rapid gallop of steeds, and he turned half round; but it was now so dark that he could discern nothing.

The clatter of hoofs increased, and in a moment more, out from the gloom and into the bar-room, dashed two horsemen. On they came, one through each door, both jerking their steeds in a position facing the bar, the heads of the horses projecting over the counter.

Each horseman, retaining a hold on his bridle-rein, slipped the same over his animal's head, sprung upon the counter, and reaching to the shelf behind the bar for decanters, filled a glass to the brim.

Lingsweider stood as if petrified. His eyes stared in astonishment, which increased as the two men faced each other, and still standing on the counter, clicked glasses. One, who had a livid scar across his face, and whom Lingsweider knew to be Duke Dudley, cried out:

"Here is to you, us, and ours! Juan H. Cortina, I drink to your very good health!"

"Thanks, Senor Dudley!" said the other.

Both men tossed off their liquor, Duke being

scarcely able to hold the glass in his trembling hand. Then he poured out another, at the same time helping Cortina.

They then turned about, facing the astonished bar-keeper.

"Senor," said the bandit chief, politely, "this is good liquor you keep. We must take some along to the Guadalupe with us. Here's good luck to you! We will remember your kind hospitality."

Both drank again. Then Dudley grasped two quart bottles, and quickly thrust them into his saddle-bags; an act which caused Lingsweider to yell:

"Gott in himmel! Vot you beebles about? Hundert t'ousand tuyfils! You vant to preak up mein leedle pizness, don't id? Ef you don't bay me, Juke, fer dot lugin'-glass vot you proke, I marks you more dan dot Garlos did. You sees vot I means somedimes. I gares not fer dot Cortina."

"You dinks I vos von tam yackass, und you can trink mein liquors mithout bayin'. Vos dot so? Py tam, I shows you burty lively quick!"

As Lingsweider closed his harangue, he bounded toward the end of the bar, sprung over it, and attempted to stay the progress of the young planter.

But Duke and Cortina were again in their saddles, and spurring out of the doors, before George even got his revolver in his hand.

"Come out to my ranch on the Guadalupe, Lingsweider, and I'll settle up all accounts!"

Thus yelled Duke Dudley. Then both these audacious devils in human shape galloped like madmen down Commerce street; the route that they would have taken, were they really going out to the ranch of the young planter.

Lingsweider let down the hammer of his revolver, and placed the weapon under the bar again.

Then he projected his arm outward, opened his fat hand, and gave himself a hard slap in the face.

"Shorge Lingsweider," he said, "you vos a tam pig fool! You vos not vit to keep dot par. You petter dake von more trink, und go to pet. Ef you don't, dare vill not pe nodings left in dot par afore mornin's."

"Dot Juke, he goes mit de tuyfil, lightnin' quick. Gordena pe tam! He vos some pig pummer, vot dinks he could scare dot Deutch Lingsweider; put I don't vos scare, voth a bicayune!"

CHAPTER XVII.

LOOKING FOR SIGN.

THE confusion and excitement at Casa Garcia was great. The citizens, rancheros and Government teamsters, who had been drawn to the scene of the fight, were so amazed that there was little else than a mob, rushing here and there, and no quarter of course was given.

Many of the horses of the outlaws were captured, and the dead bandits were hurled over the wall, and the grounds soon cleared by Old Rocky of all intruders.

About the same time that Duke Dudley and Cortina were in the Plaza Bar, the surgeon, who was attending to the wounded, requested one of the Texans to gallop to town for some brandy, which was necessary to sustain a man under an operation. The messenger started at once for the Plaza Bar.

From this man Lingsweider learned for the first time that the attack upon Casa Garcia had been made by no other than the dreaded Scourge of the Rio Grande.

This news caused the eyes of the bar-keeper to bulge out in amazement, for he had not for a moment believed the assertion of the stranger that he was the noted bandit chief.

Not only was George informed of the evident co-partnership between Dudley and Cortina, and of the abduction of the two maidens, but also of the shooting of Carlos and Will Wild.

This information so infuriated Lingsweider that he was beside himself with rage, to think that he had been outside the bar and had not shot the two men down in their tracks.

However, he could now put the scouts on their trail, and this was a great satisfaction, especially as, from the information volunteered by the man who came for the brandy, the scouts were organizing a party to gallop toward the Rio Grande, and in this way to cut off Cortina and Duke Dudley and rescue the captives.

With great show of importance and a copious interlarding of grotesque gestures, Lingsweider went on to explain:

"My goot man, you goes pack und dells dot Auldt Rogky dot Juke und Gordena vos mit me at der Biaz Bar, und dook von trink, pesides a pottle or dwo ter der roat. Dell dot auldt skow-et dat dose tuyfils goes fast to dot Guadalupe, to dot Juke's ranch, und dey vas 'pout grazzy mit dose prandy vot dey sdeas before dot sun beebles over dot Bowder Haus Hill."

The Texan waited to hear no more, but dashed off like mad on his return to Casa Garcia.

When Duke Dudley saw Carlos stagger out from the thicket, and hastened off in his alarm, he would, had he but lingered, seen the young

Castilian again sink to earth, for the shock caused by the bullet from Duke's revolver glancing upon his skull, made him unable for some time to recall the near past.

But as he caught sight of the shattered door, saw the blood-stained sward and the dead Mexicans, and heard also the confusion within, he remembered the fearful dangers that had threatened his poor sister, and he gazed upward instinctively to the windows of the music-room, for he knew that if the bandits forced their way thither, poor Celesta would be at their mercy.

As he thus looked up, his blood, although fired by the fever from his wound, seemed to congeal in his veins, for between the iron bars, plainly shown by the moon, was the hideous face of his recent antagonist in the duello—the man who had brought an avalanche of misery, anguish and terror upon him and his.

There could be no mistake. He distinctly saw the livid mark which he himself had imprinted upon the villain's face.

This realization was so agonizing that the overtaxed brain of the young man could not stand the pressure, and he again fell to the earth insensible, as we have just seen, soon after being discovered by Old Rocky. The latter recalled the fact that he had seen the stranger, Will Wild, and Carlos fall from the roof, apparently shot by the outlaw chief and Duke Dudley. He therefore searched the thicket and found Will also seemingly dead.

Both were at once conveyed into the *casa* and delivered over to the care of the surgeon.

Old Rocky, Tom and Jack had all they could do to attend to in such an emergency; but they managed to calm the maddened mob and select a number of volunteers to accompany them on the proposed trip, with the object of rescuing the captive maidens and avenging them and the death of their pards, as well as the cowardly and murderous attack upon Casa Garcia.

If they should succeed in accomplishing the capture of Cortina, all Texas would ring with shouts of joy, and the names of those who were instruments in bringing the bloody career of this noted bandit to an end would be sounded throughout the Southwest and recorded in the annals of the Lone Star State.

The scouts dispatched one of the rangers who had been at the fandango after their horses, and were looking to their arms and getting together such food as the kitchen of Casa Garcia afforded, to pack in their saddle-bags, when the man who had been sent off for brandy galloped through the gate, shouting madly as he rode:

"Cortina and Duke Dudley are in San Antonio! They galloped into the Plaza Bar but ten minutes ago, and have started for Dudley's ranch on the Guadalupe!"

Wild yells of exultation rung on all sides. Men sprung upon their steeds, and spurred in mad haste, a mingled mob, out from the gate, thundering toward the Main Plaza: while those on foot also ran, as fast as their legs could carry them, in the same direction. No one seemed to take into consideration the fact that they were quite as liable to see Cortina where they were, as to have any chance of overtaking the bandit on foot.

None were left at Casa Garcia, except Old Rocky, Tom, Jack, the surgeon, and the wounded. Even the man who had brought the news sprung from his horse, placed the bottle of brandy upon the floor, remounted, and spurred insanely off after the crowd.

"Dang my half-sister's ole cat's kitten!" yelled the old scout in rage; which, however, soon vanished, as he continued:

"Let 'em glide! Come ter medertate, I'm mighty glad thet they skuted; fer we'd 'a' hed a pack o' bother w' them. Now, we-'uns kin 'tend ter biz in ole style, an' hev a better show ter win ther game. I doesn't jump a step until I knows 'bout which bunch o' grass ther snake air rattlin' from. I tumbled ter ther leetle game o' Dudley an' ther Chap'rell Cock, soon es I heerd Jim yell."

"Hit's a put-up job, an' I'm a -gamblin' thet both ther cusses air atween this p'int an' ther *casa* o' Gin'ral Twiggs, an' thet both on 'em hes fixed things ter glide Rio-Grande - ways tergether. Let's go an' see 'bout how ther Doc hes fixed Carlos an' thet man Wild, fer, ef they kin be patched up, we-'uns must take 'em 'long, I s'pose, er they'll skute theselves, arter we're gone, an' mebbe so git slashed by some o' ther sneakin' Greasers what lit out from hyer so speedy, an' air a-layin' 'roun' in ther bush."

"Carlos an' this pard o' his'n will jist howl wi' pure mad, ef we-'uns levants without 'em!"

"Reckon they'll not be able ter stan' ther raffle," put in Jack.

"They'll go, ef they hes ter crawl," asserted Tom Clark.

So saying, the three scouts entered the room that had been appropriated for the wounded; and, to their surprise, found the young men both sitting up, though much excited.

Will's head had been attended to, and the blood removed from the faces of both. A glass of brandy was given to each, and then Carlos, in an appealing voice, cried out:

"Senor Rocky! For the love of Heaven, tell me if you know aught of my sister! Has she

fallen again into the power of that merciless fiend, Duke Dudley?"

The old scout saw at once that Carlos knew nothing of the most important and outrageous event of the night—the capture of Celesta, and her maid. The surgeon, very properly, cautioned Old Rocky, by a glance; for the young Castilian was now in a state that bordered on insanity.

"Mebbe so, ther leetle gal gut skeered, an' skuted. Thar war sich a hellish rumpus, thet hit would stampede all ther grave-stuns on Powder House Hill. One thing air dead sure an' sartin though. Ther weemin hes dusted, sloped, lit out, levanted, an' we-uns can't find out which way, 'fore sun-up. Howsomever, ther good Lord ain't a-goin' ter 'low sich helpless innercents ter git wo'ted by condemned cusses like Dudley an' ther Chap'rell Cock."

The words of the old scout, notwithstanding he strove to beat around the bush, served only to plunge the young man into the depths of most hopeless despair.

Will Wild, however, proved himself the man that he was; although his own mind was tortured. He sprung to his feet, slapped Carlos heartily on the back, and said cheerily:

"Come, come, my friend! Look before you at these three stanch, well-known and skillful scouts, who are ready and eager to serve you to the death; as indeed so am I, in my inexperienced way. You ought to be thankful that these men are your friends, and will stand by you."

"But we do not know that the Senorita is in the power of those wretches. It is our duty to throw off pain and repining, and set out in search of her. Come; let us see you as yourself—a brave man ready for the rescue, if it be so, and for revenge!"

"Hurrah fer Will Wild!" cried out Jack Hodge.

"Thet's ther way ter put hit, pard," said Old Rocky; "an' I'm ormighty glad ter find thet yer pans out just es I told ther boyees. We'll ram ourselves through post-oaks, live-oaks, mesquites an' cactus, afore we'll 'low ther Angel o' ther Alamo ter be toted 'cross ther Grande."

"We'll scoop in Duke Dudley, an' gi'n yer a show ter twitch on ther lariat, when we hangs him up ter dry!" was Tom Clark's somewhat positive encouragement.

"I doesn't know much 'bout either of yer, but I pards with Jack hyer, an' Old Rocky, an' I knows every crook an' turn o' ther Bravo, an' every cotton-tailed rabbit's trail 'mong ther chap'rells."

"Come! Let's whoop'er-up! Our nags orter be hyer 'bout this time, I reckon."

For the greater part of the time that his friends were speaking, Carlos sat, with his face buried in his hands. Gradually, he now removed the same, and at length arose, grasping a hand of each of the two last speakers; his pale face showing a fierce, fiery, strong determination, as well as the most intense anguish.

He then, without a word, caught up his belt of arms; his eyes and actions speaking whole volumes.

Buckling the belt around him, he looked around for the sombreros of Will and himself; by a nervous gesture indicating his readiness to proceed without delay.

All now proceeded forthwith to the stables, where Carlos and Will got their horses in readiness; the last act of poor Antonio having been the removal of Will's blooded steed, from the thicket to the stable, according to the secret orders of his master. This had probably saved the noble animal from being appropriated by Cortina, when the latter escaped from the casa, with, as he supposed, Celesta Garcia in his arms.

The horses had but just been gotten ready, when the animals belonging to Jack and the old scout were led into the gate by the ranger who had been dispatched after them; and also an extra steed, fully equipped, for Tom Clark.

This man reported that the mob of infuriated Texans had sped, in a mixed, unruly stampede, from the Main Plaza, down Commerce street, to the Alamo.

This caused Old Rocky to mutter, in a derisive manner:

"They bees a pack o' condemned soft-headed nincompoops; an' they air goin' ter git sold cheap. But I'm ormighty full o' glad thet they hes levanted. Hit's best so, a heap."

"We-uns hes gut a cl'ar field, an' kin glide a dang'd sight better without 'em. I see'd thet from ther fust."

All now mounted, leaving the ranger in charge of Casa Garcia and the wounded, and proceeded to the river. Then, having crossed, and left the animals in charge of Carlos and Will, the scouts once more separated to examine the bottom timber for some trace of the missing maidens.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DUKE DESERTS HIS PARD.

WHEN Cortina and Dudley galloped down Commerce street, they did not turn to the left after crossing the bridge, and proceed to the Alamo Plaza, in order to take the road to

the Upper Guadalupe; but, in a mad gallop, they turned their steeds to the right, and soon reached the same point, although by a round-about way, by which they had entered the town. They then dashed into the mesquites, at the rear of the mansion of General Twiggs.

The generous manner in which Duke had treated himself to brandy at the Plaza Bar, and also from a bottle on the run, had made a changed man of him.

His desperate recklessness returned with increased strength, and he again felt equal to any perilous deed; still, he felt in awe and dread of the man by whose side he rode—a fear, that no brandy could dispel.

He knew that he was now no more nor less than a captive himself. That, should he attempt to desert Cortina, the latter would shoot him on the instant.

He perceived, too, that the bandit chief always took the precaution to keep a short distance in the rear; his eagle glance seeming to Dudley, to be fixed suspiciously upon him. His words, however, were friendly—almost too much so to be thoroughly sincere.

The course taken by them, on the return, was not near the river bottom, but through the mesquites; Cortina being suspicious of danger, and ready to dash east, for the open plain, at any moment.

The outlaw chief had an object in going to the Plaza Bar.

He knew well that the mob of Texans at Casa Garcia would almost immediately be informed of it; and also that he and Duke had mentioned that they were bound for the Guadalupe, as well as the fact that they had ridden to the Alamo Plaza.

This report he knew, would draw the Texans off on a false trail and thus enable him to get a good start toward the Rio Grande before they discovered it.

Had he known that the fair girl whom he had borne from Casa Garcia was the maid of Celesta, and that the real Celesta had been abducted by the man who rode in his front, and was by him secreted; had he known that Duke Dudley intended to outwit him, he had already deceived him, and was now concocting a plan to escape from his company and espionage with the beautiful Castilian girl, leaving him in ignorance of the fact that he was periling his life for a servant—had Cortina known this, his knife would have been in Duke Dudley's back to the hilt.

But Duke could, as yet, see no way out of the predicament in which he was entangled; and he was filled with terror, as he thought of the consequences which would follow a discovery, by the bandit chief, of the real Celesta.

Dudley began to think that the probability was, he would be forced to leave his fair captive where she was, and continue on with Cortina until an opening occurred for him to escape through the great speed of his horse, then he could return for her, and flee to some isolated town in Mexico, above the point where Cortina carried on his warfare against the Texans, and where the bandit would never be apt to go.

Plan as he did, his thoughts flashing with electric velocity, Duke could see no way out of his peculiarly puzzling fix, unless he abandoned Celesta, and this was like giving up his life, so strong was his desire in that way, to avenge the insult of her brother.

Cortina seemed to be evolving plans in his mind, of more importance than anything connected with his present position; for he spoke not, although at times he shot sweeping glances up and down the line of timber to the west, that marked the course of the San Antonio River.

But a short time elapsed, when Dudley halted, pointing significantly to the dark shades of the pecans.

"Well, Senor Dudley?" inquired the bandit chief, as if he did not in the least understand the gesture.

"Directly from this point, on the edge of the timber where you observe a lightning blasted pecan, is the place where, as I informed you, I secreted the girl. She is gagged and bound and lies in the undergrowth."

"Shall I bring her, or will you go for her yourself?"

For a moment or two, Cortina spoke not. He appeared to listen for sounds from beyond the river; but, in reality, he was dissecting the intonation of Duke's voice, evidently suspicious of treachery, although the young planter had no grounds for supposing this to be so.

The words that followed, however, proved the conclusions which had been arrived at by the bandit, during his short deliberations and mental reasonings.

"There is danger in the woods, Senor Dudley; and my life is perhaps of more importance to others than yours, as you have cut yourself off from all former associates by this night's work. You may bring the girl, but I advise you to leave your horse in the mesquites, a few yards from the timber, and steal along very cautiously, for those *diablo* scouts are doubtless, at this time, scouring the bottom. I will smoke a cigarette while I am waiting for you."

Duke Dudley, to hide the joy and relief that ruled him, raised a brandy-bottle to his lips, and drank a deep draught. Then he said, calmly:

"It is as you say, captian, a perilous undertaking under the circumstances, but here goes! We have lost too much, and braved too much danger, to leave the beauty behind who has been the cause of death and dishonor—death to your brave boys and dishonor to me!"

"Caramba! I shall have a terrible revenge for that slash across my face. Keep on the alert, and if they jump me, be ready for a long and rapid gallop."

With these words, Duke started his horse slowly through the mesquites, a pistol-shot in distance away.

No sooner did he realize that the eyes of the dreaded Cortina were no longer upon him, than his whole manner changed. His face became contorted with fury, and an insane thirst for vengeance; while he shook his clinched fist toward the point where he had left the bandit chief.

Then, as he neared the timber, he became exultant to a degree bordering on foolishness, for he felt that he should now successfully carry out his plan, outwitting the most cunning outlaw in America, as well the most noted scouts of Texas.

Much as he feared the latter he would much rather make a dash through them than travel another mile with Cortina, who, when he once should get the maid whom he supposed to be Celesta in his arms, would be very likely the next moment to shoot him in the back, and then taunt his dying moments with derisive laughter.

Springing from his horse, Duke led the animal more to the right, avoiding the point where he had left Juanita, and then entering the timber by a path within a few paces of the spot where Celesta was.

Soon, to his joy, he saw his fair captive, but her eyes showed that she had recovered consciousness, being filled with horror as his repulsive face came before her.

Not a moment was there to lose. Life and death, to him, hung as by a hair. Clasp the maiden in his arms, he retraced his steps, mounted his horse, and rode slowly along the soft path for some distance.

Then, realizing that the opposite side would be safer, he forded, unluckily for him, at a point where the absence of trees for a short space allowed the moon to shine down upon the water as it rolled in a broad, silvery sheet.

Cortina sat on his horse enjoying his cigarette until it became so short that it burned his finger.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed angrily, at the same time reasoning that Duke Dudley ought to be putting in an appearance.

He listened intently, his features showing great impatience, not unmixed with apprehension; but no sounds broke the stillness of the night. Had the young planter been surprised by the scouts he would have yelled for aid.

Thus the bandit argued, and he was greatly perplexed. This feeling changed to a furious madness as he was forced to the conclusion that Dudley had hoodwinked him. He felt that there were grounds for believing this when he called to mind the fact that Duke had avoided his gaze when he asked if he should bring the girl.

Cortina cursed furiously at finding himself so easily deceived, and swore, should his suspicions prove to be true, to have his revenge.

As more time passed the outlaw was convinced that Dudley had stolen Celesta and fled; but he resolved, at the risk of his own life, to advance and investigate.

Not an instant did he linger after this decision, for he knew he had but a couple of hours in which to get beyond the ranches and secrete himself in the timber.

There he could graze his horse, and perchance get some repose, for he had not closed his eyes since the previous night, and then only for a couple of hours.

The soft grass gave out no sound, and he urged his horse to the edge of the timber, sprung at once, revolver in hand, into the undergrowth, and advanced a few paces. Then he stopped abruptly, filled with the utmost astonishment, so much so that he forgot for the moment the danger by which he was encompassed.

Before him lay the form of his captive, bound and gagged, even as Dudley had asserted!

Where, then, was Dudley?

Had the scouts discovered and killed him with their bowies before he could make an outcry for help?

If so, his own life now hung by a hair!

With this thought he clasped the terrified girl in his arms, ran from the thicket, and throwing her over the neck of his horse, sprung into his saddle, took her in his arms, and whirled about.

But as he did so the sharp crack of a revolver burst from his rear, and his sombrero flew from his head.

Dashing through the mesquites at full speed, the bandit chief soon shot away from the tim-

ber toward the trail that led to Mission San Juan.

We must now return to the eastern bank of the river, where Old Rocky, Tom and Jack left Will Wild and Carlos with the horses while they went to inspect the timber more carefully than time had before permitted.

Wild, however, was not the man to remain inactive.

Tossing the reins of the horses of Jack and Tom over a dead limb, he urged his own animal down along the bank of the river.

As he was thus proceeding he saw the silvery surface broken by a horseman—a man who held in his arms a fair girl, whose death-pale face could be perceived even at that distance. Will knew at once the form and the scarred face of the rider. He knew that it was Duke Dudley, and that he was carrying with him the fair girl whose image, at first sight, had been photographed indelibly upon his own brain!

Dudley rapidly disappeared.

There was no time to be lost. There was no time to return and inform his friends, and a yell might seal the doom of the angelic girl by warning Dudley of pursuit, and thus rendering rescue impossible.

Convinced of this, Will Wild dashed spurs in pursuit of Duke Dudley alone, his friends being ignorant of the important discovery he had made.

Cortina, with his prize—for so he supposed her to be—had been shot at, not by Wild but by Old Rocky, who, having come up with him suddenly, rushed back for his horse after having fired a hasty shot.

A signal brought Jack and Tom to the same point, when all sprung upon their steeds, none noticing in their great excitement the absence of Will Wild.

"Spur fer yer lives, boyees, an' foller me!" sung out the old scout. "I hes see'd ther Chap-rel Cock, an' ther condemned cuss hes gut poor leetle Celesty!"

Like madmen all dashed through the timber and mesquites, Carlos deathly pale, his face drawn with anguish, fury, and a thirst for revenge; all riding like the wind after Cortina and Juanita, while over the river, bounding toward the Rio Medina, was Duke Dudley, and in his arms the fair girl whom the scouts supposed to be before them in the embrace of the bandit chief.

And after the former, tearing on through the dense undergrowth, rode Will Wild—the only hope of the beautiful Castilian, who was ignorant of his exertions toward her rescue, a merciful unconsciousness having once more fallen upon her.

CHAPTER XIX.

CORTINA DECEIVED.

THE bandit chief felt sure that in five minutes the scouts would be speeding after him, and he urged his horse to a clump of mesquites upon which his sombrero had lodged, securing the same, and giving a taunting and exultant laugh as he did so.

He could not enumerate the times that his clothing had been perforated by the bullets of the Texans, and now he had another proof that he bore a charmed life.

For all this, he dared not brave the Fates beyond reason, so he dashed at the utmost speed into the road that ran nearly parallel with the river.

There was a long stretch of this road that was as straight as the course of an arrow, and down this the outlaw shot at terrific speed, in order to get as far as possible from the point where he had entered the road before the Texans could arrive at it.

As he came to a curve turning toward the open plain, he cast a searching glance behind him and gave a yell of satisfaction, for, as yet, no pursuers were within view. He had a horse that he could depend upon both for speed and endurance, and he was anxious to know if there was a superior animal among those who, he felt assured, were dashing after him; but he was not anxious enough to lessen the speed of his own beast.

He felt confident that he could outwit his pursuers in some manner, even were the scouts who had been at the fandango in the party. But he hoped that the latter had been duped by the assertion he had made at the Plaza Bar, in regard to his going to the Guadalupe.

The absence of the young planter was still a mystery to Cortina from the fact that the former had not taken the maiden whom he so much coveted. As matters stood, he thought it probable that the same man, who had fired at himself, had sprung upon and stabbed Duke to the heart.

The moon was now low in the west, and he was within the shade cast by the heavy timber of the San Antonio. This prevented him from closely examining the countenance of the maiden who still lay limp, though her eyes were now open, in his arms.

As yet there were no indications of pursuit. But as he had thus far galloped his horse at terrific speed, it was impossible for those who might pursue him to gain a fraction of the ground between them.

Just before reaching Granger's Ranch, on the east side of the river directly across from San Jose Mission, the bandit chief turned from the traveled road into the timber and, at a slower pace, proceeded toward the ford below the Mission.

When on the opposite side of the stream, he again entered the pecans, traveling but a short distance. Then he removed the kerchief, with which Duke Dudley had gagged his captive, but she made no outcry, neither did she speak.

The moon was now below the horizon, but the gray streaks of coming day shot up eastward, although it was not sufficiently light to enable the outlaw to distinguish any peculiarity about his captive.

Cortina was not the man to be greatly affected by having a fair maiden in his power; for, in this respect, his handsome form and far from disagreeable face had brought him admiration from the sex unsought.

In the present case he had only a heavy ransom in view; and now that he had lost so many of his men, and had been put in so much peril, he made up his mind to double the amount that he had at the first decided upon. At no time did he entertain the remotest idea of allowing Duke Dudley to retain the prize, or even to have a voice in the bestowal of it.

Cortina had been riding latterly at a moderate pace, and now looking back he saw four horsemen shoot out from the bushes at the same point which he had left, and dash at great speed on his trail.

He now felt positive that the scouts, and they only, had followed him, and he began to realize his danger. But there was one thing greatly in his favor.

When he had recovered his horse he found that the bridle had been slipped, and that the animal had been for some time feeding upon the rich grass in the thicket.

He knew that the guard who had been left in charge of the animals could not have done this, for their orders had been to stand firm and hold the horses in readiness for an instant retreat of the owners.

He decided that his faithful followers who had escaped to the river from the fierce fight inside the walls of the garden, had by the same route which he had taken through the mesquites, repaired to the spot at which the horses had been left to secure a mount.

Finding that the animals were all running wildly about, and coming upon his steed and Dudley's, knowing that they might soon need them for a desperate run, they must have slipped the bridles and lengthened the lariats, and then securing horses from those that were wandering amid the timber made their escape.

From this Cortina judged that some of his men must be ahead of him on their way to the thick shades of the Rio Medina, where they might possibly wait for him.

Indeed he felt confident that those of his men who had escaped slaughter would not return to the main command on the Rio Grande without proofs of his capture or death. In fact they would not dare face their comrades without some reasonable explanation in regard to the absence of their chief.

The more he pondered upon this subject the more confident he became of meeting some of his fellow bandits on the Medina, which was the nearest point to San Antonio at which they could with anything like safety await him.

After discovering the scouts in hot pursuit of him, the outlaw chief again dashed onward at full speed; and the animal having had rest and grazing, with its ears laid back viciously, as if provoked at being imposed upon by a double load, with its eyes flashing, and long mane and tail flowing wildly, flew like the breeze; presenting with its burden a picture very agreeable to look upon, if the circumstances and character of that burden were unknown to the observer.

Not five miles had Cortina thus galloped, sweeping the prairie south, east, and west, with his suspicious glance, and from time to time gazing backward toward the fast galloping scouts, who seemed to gain very slowly upon him; when as he looked to the west he discovered afar off a dark object that moved toward the Medina in a course parallel to his own. A short inspection proved to his practiced eye that it was a horseman, and to the wonder of the outlaw he seemed to be positioned and burdened exactly as he was himself.

And now another coincidence was revealed. The distant horseman was being pursued also, but only by one rider.

A moment more and Cortina was convinced that both the men, the pursued and the pursuer, were mounted upon blooded animals, or what are known in Texas as "American" horses. There was no doubt either in his mind that the burden carried was a woman. The outlaw was completely bewildered. Not far did he gallop after this discovery before he gazed searchingly into the face of his captive, only to be still more puzzled as well as not a little suspicious.

The maiden in his arms was far from being of that clear and delicate complexion which characterized the descendants of the daughters of Old Castile.

Poor Juanita had heard the shouts of the

bandits when they had been attacked by the scouts, and she had also heard their loud and appealing cries for Cortina.

She knew that the man who had carried her from one portion of the bottom timber to the other was Duke Dudley. But she felt sure that the man who had clutched her when she opened the chamber door, fearfully mistaken in believing that her master and Senor Wild were the men in the music-room, and who now held her captive, galloping fast she knew not where, was none other than Cortina, the bandit of the Rio Grande!

The poor girl was also confident that her mistress, too, was a captive, and was even now, perhaps, being carried fast from friends and home to a fearful fate.

Why Cortina had gone to such trouble, and risked his life to capture herself, was an enigma which could be solved only by one supposition—and that was, he believed her to be Celesta Garcia!

She had entered the music-room attired in rich clothing that had formerly been worn by her mistress, and the latter not being within view, the stranger, whom she now believed to be Cortina, had thought he saw the prize he sought before him.

But where could her young mistress be now? Was she also a captive, and to whom?

It was possible that Duke Dudley had entered the chamber, and, finding her there, had borne her away.

Then what had become of Carlos and Senor Wild?

Why had they left her and her mistress to the mercy of the bandits and Duke Dudley?

These were questions which greatly puzzled Juanita; but a question now came from her captor that surprised her, and that she did not immediately answer.

At first she had been so filled with dread at her strange and perilous position, that she was speechless; but the bright sunshine had cheered her somewhat, and as it revealed to her the handsome face and form of her captor, she became more composed. She even began to disbelieve the truth of the reports which laid at the door of this terrible chief many murders and other dastard crimes.

She fully believed that Duke Dudley was a thousand times worse than Cortina could possibly be.

The question that so startled Juanita, asked by the bandit, in a quick and imperative voice, entirely devoid of any intonation that would naturally originate from admiration or regard for her, was this:

"Celesta Garcia rides toward the Rio Grande with Cortina the Ranchero. How many doubloons will her brother Carlos give to see her face again?"

The suspicion that had entered Cortina's mind when he saw the distant horseman with a burden in his arms, was merely a suspicion, without definite point or foundation. It had scarcely an object or a comprehension for its existence; but his question, nevertheless, originated from it. The bandit watched the face of his captive closely as he spoke, but not the slightest change was there, in glance or countenance, to reveal the thoughts that ruled the brain of the anxious and perplexed girl.

She now knew, beyond a doubt, that Cortina had supposed her to be Celesta; and she was greatly relieved by the question, for she resolved to pretend to be her mistress, for this would insure her against outrage.

"Celesta Garcia knows nothing of the amount of gold her brother would give. Why have you torn me from my home? Where are you taking me? I am hungry, weary and lame. Such a man as you appear to be, should not war on women. A brave man will not cause a weak girl to suffer."

It was evident that Juanita was indeed weak, or she would have used more independent language.

But Cortina seemed reassured as to the name and character of his captive; her cultured voice going far to convince him that he had made no mistake. However, he had neither time nor inclination to question further, or to study his captive; for he was now approaching the timber of the Rio Medina, twelve miles from San Antonio, and about the same distance from the Pleasanton Ford.

His pursuers had been gaining on him, while the stranger horseman had shot into the timber of the Medina, west from him; the river making a bend northward in that direction.

Casting his eyes directly ahead, the bandit chief was not only amazed and astonished, but filled with the greatest concern and anxiety, by the sight of some half-a-dozen horsemen riding rapidly out from the timber, as if to intercept him.

CHAPTER XX.

A TANGLED WEB.

CORTINA felt that he had never before been in such a position.

There seemed to be no chance left open for escape.

To the left were two horsemen, evidently his enemies, one of them already in the shelter of

the timber, and the other fast following. Either of them might halt on the edge of the wood, and lie in wait to shoot him, should he change his course in that direction.

To halt was certain death, for the four scouts were galloping fast in his rear, not two miles distant; and to turn to the east over the plain would be of no avail, as they would certainly quarter in that direction.

His horse had already been taxed beyond its powers, and was panting with exertion, and covered with foam.

Truly it seemed that the celebrated bandit chief was doomed.

The end of his murderous career seemed at hand. Death seemed inevitable; and now, if never before, the cheek of the Chaparral Cock turned pale.

He was alone, and in the enemies' country.

Not for an instant, however, did he slacken speed; for the danger behind him was but too fully realized, while that in front was as yet undecided.

But the outlaw did not long remain in ignorance of the character of the half-dozen horsemen who dashed out, in a scattering manner, from the undergrowth.

There was no mistaking the glinting lances, from which dangled the scalp ornamentations, or the flowing hair, and prancing mustangs, now plainly visible.

An advance party of Comanches were in his path. This Cortina saw at once; and yet, he drove spurs deep, and kept his course, determined to dash through the braves, at a six-shooter charge.

This was his one chance. But, to his great relief, the savages whirled, and lashed their horses back into the timber, as if appalled at the sight before them.

There could be no doubt that the Comanches supposed that all the whites belonged to one party; and, seeing one dash into the timber westward, and another close following, they inferred that many others had already entered the bottom, who would cut them off, the scouts in the rear seeming to indicate the presence of quite a number.

Once more the hopes of the bandit chief brightened.

Gradually turning his horse to the east, he aimed to strike the Medina bottom, at a point some two hundred yards from where the Indians had appeared, and disappeared.

It was necessary now to proceed in such a manner as to deceive the scouts, who would, no doubt, gallop down below the point he had entered, with the view of cutting him off. He soon, therefore, formed a plan reasonable enough to promise success.

He rode along the side of the stream until he found a place at which it was possible for him to cross.

Here, he forced his horse into the water, the poor girl shrieking as she saw the dark rolling river, fearing that the outlaw was about to cast her into the stream, in order that he might the more easily escape his pursuers. No attention, however, did he pay to his captive; his mind being too much occupied in guiding his horse across the stream.

The bank was at length surmounted, and Cortina galloped quickly through the ribbon of timber, several hundred yards in extent, that bordered the south side of the Medina.

Urging his horse out from this upon the plain that extended toward the San Miguel, he now intended to dash down along the border of the woods, for a mile or so, following the windings, and again turn into the shades; thus giving himself time to rest his horse, and proceed further down stream, before the scouts could possibly follow his trail to that point.

But the outlaw was doomed to disappointment.

His plans were frustrated very speedily, for no sooner did his horse break cover, than the bandit, sweeping the plain before him with eager gaze, beheld a large war-party of Indians not more than two rifle-shots from the timber, and all at a halt, presenting, in their savage war-gear, a most horrible sight. Quick as thought the bandit jerked on the powerful Spanish bit, and soon himself, his horse, and his captive were concealed from view, without, as far as he could determine, their having been observed.

The features of Cortina now assumed an exultant look, for he believed that they who pursued him would, without doubt, be killed or captured by the Comanches.

Not one ray of hope was now entertained by poor Juanita, seeing the imminent danger of those to whom she had looked for her rescue.

The bandit chief leaned over from his saddle, and put his captive upon her feet. He then sprang to the earth, and crawling to the edge of the undergrowth, peeped out upon the plain.

Juanita sunk down in the bushes, closing her eyes, and giving herself up to listless, hopeless despair.

The scouts, as the reader has been enabled to understand, found little difficulty, after reaching the spot where Old Rocky had fired from the thicket upon the outlaw chief, in getting upon the trail of the latter.

The knowledge possessed by the old scout, of every cow-path in the bottom timber, and his well-grounded assurance that Cortina would cross the river at the ford below the San Jose Mission, and then dash toward the Medina—this knowledge enabled him and his pards to discover the bandit much sooner than if they had been in a section more remote from the settlements.

They galloped immediately into the down-country wagon-road, and left the same for the ford, where on the west side of the river, the old scout dismounted, to prove his almost certain convictions; more, however, to satisfy Carlos Garcia than anything else, the latter being nearly insane from his anxiety in regard to his sister.

Proofs there were most convincing. The water that had dripped from the bandit's horse as the animal sprang from the river, still covering the pebbles for some distance from the ford.

"Whoop-er-up, boyees!" called out Old Rocky. "Hyer's fresh sign fer yer. We'll git ther Angel back safe, without crumplin' a feather, er we'll mash ther hull univarse!"

This the old scout said in a cheering and most confident tone of voice, which, however, was assumed for the benefit of Carlos, for he knew only too well the cunning, desperate, and merciless character of the dreaded king of the bandits of the Rio Grande.

On swept the scouts, and a cheer broke from Old Rocky's lips as he discovered the outlaw chief speeding afar out on the plain, toward the Rio Medina; for the old scout had, notwithstanding many words and reasonings, expected the Chaparral Cock to, in some way, elude pursuit. Possibly, so he thought, he might be daring enough to proceed down the San Antonio river, regardless of the many ranches he would be forced to pass on the way.

Not a word was now spoken, but all drove spurs to their horses: Carlos, with set teeth and agony-drawn face, his eyes unnaturally brilliant and fixed upon the despoiler of his home and abductor of the only being that was near and dear to him on earth.

On, on they went; pursuers and pursued! The attention of the scouts and Carlos were fastened entirely upon Cortina, during miles of travel, not noticing for a long time that others were on the plain to the west, the two horsemen having sped from a point in that direction, and now proceeding at terrific speed in a southeasterly course, being more plainly seen each mile that they traversed, although it was impossible to determine the character of the riders. One of them, greatly to the surprise and amazement of the scouts and Carlos, bore in his arms a burden, which they judged was a human being.

"Hit's a couple o' ther cussed Greasers what hes skuted inter ther timber arter ther fight, an' then kerral'd them nags from 'mong ther mesquites. I reckon one o' them's got a pard thet's bad hurted."

Thus explained Old Rocky, but had not his attention, and also that of his comrades, been so taken up with Cortina, as the latter approached, they would have seen—the two strange horsemen being at that time much nearer—that the riders to the west were not only white men but that they were mounted upon "American" horses, and that the burden in the arms of the leader was undoubtedly a woman. They would have seen also that one of the horsemen was undoubtedly in pursuit of the other.

Old Rocky would without doubt have recognized, or at least had strong suspicions in regard to the identity of the party; but from the fact that they all supposed the captive of Cortina to be Celesta Garcia, they were all tortured with apprehension in regard to her safety, and all resolved to save her or die in the attempt.

Consequently their whole attention was fastened upon the movements of the bandit chief, especially after the unexpected appearance of the Indians upon the scene, the presence of whom caused them double anxiety. And as the red braves sat their horses for a moment, themselves amazed and astonished, the scouts, with a yell of apprehension and dread, clutched their revolvers more firmly, drove spurs without mercy, and dashed onward.

When the Indians disappeared the scouts were once more dumfounded, but at the same time greatly relieved, for they had looked for the capture or the death of the fair girl, in a struggle between the red-men and the outlaws.

Well did Old Rocky know that those half-dozen warriors were not far from a much larger and stronger war-party, and their sudden disappearance caused him to decide that they had gone to warn their fellow braves of the approach of the whites. The old scout was seldom deceived.

When Cortina gradually guided his horse to the left, to avoid the point where the Indians had disappeared, and soon after dashed from view, Old Rocky no longer restrained himself.

"Whoop-er-up now, boyees, er Celesty air a goner, dead sure! Ther dang'd cuss'll skut through ther brush an' git away from us ef we doesn't look spry. Spread out! Tie yer nags

in ther thick brush down-stream, then use yer peepers an' look sharp for ther Grande hellyun, an' ther painted reds too!"

Madly the four horses now flew over the intervening space in a scattering line, dashing soon after into the thick timber.

In five minutes after the scouts had disappeared all four men were crawling toward the river through the undergrowth, some twenty yards apart, they having secured their horses on the northern edge of the timber, in dense thickets, as Old Rocky had directed them.

Finding no trace of the bandit chief, the old scout, now more anxious than ever in regard to Celeste, happened to reach the bank of the river at the same Point with Carlos Garcia.

"Keep a stiff upper lip an' foller ther ole man. We must hump ourselves over this hyer drink."

With these words Old Rocky sprang into the branches of a tree, climbing like a squirrel, and followed by Carlos, both making their way by the interlocked branches that formed an archway over the river, to the opposite side.

This accomplished, they proceeded, as fast as was possible without causing commotion, toward the southern edge of the bottom-timber.

Upon reaching the near vicinity of the open plain the old scout suddenly stopped and drew his knife, directing the glance of Carlos to a point ahead of them, where, in plain view, above the undergrowth, was to be seen the head of a horse, the animal panting laboriously. At once they knew that they had providentially happened on the halting place of the bandit chief.

Crawling cautiously onward, they discovered Juanita, apparently fast asleep, and her hands bound securely.

Never were men more thunderstruck than Carlos and Old Rocky, both having expected that Celesta was before them.

The young Castilian sunk forward with a groan of anguish that aroused the hopeless girl.

CHAPTER XXI.

TERRIBLE RISKS.

For an instant the two men gazed into each other's eyes, but there was no time to lose.

Cortina must be close at hand. The old scout, therefore, made a gesture to Carlos to cut the bonds of Juanita, and bear her away; while he stood, with knife in hand, lest the bandit should show himself.

The poor girl could not really tell, such was the condition of her mind, whether she saw Old Rocky and Carlos before her in life, or whether it was a fancy of her disordered brain—a waking dream.

The young Castilian felt sure that Juanita must know where her young mistress was; and he was now most eager to reach a place where they could speak on the subject with safety. He therefore raised the girl to her feet, and assisted her toward the river, Old Rocky walking backward in the same direction, expecting each instant that the bandit chief would appear.

And appear he did, just a moment too soon, at the very instant that the old scout was about to make one more step backward and disappear in the thicket.

Cortina saw the Texan before he discovered the absence of Juanita; then, as if knowing by intuition that his captive had been taken from him, he jerked his revolver, and fired on the instant.

The old scout interpreted his movement, and fell to the earth, thus avoiding the shot; still he kept close watch of the outlaw, who quickly sprang upon his horse, gave one piercing yell, and dashed through the undergrowth down the river.

Well did Old Rocky know what that yell had been given for, and also why the bandit had discharged his revolver, when he knew that Indians were in the vicinity. It was to draw the Comanches to the spot in order that the latter could capture or kill the whites who had pursued him, and rescued the maiden, that it had cost him so much to secure!

Springing to his feet, the old scout darted toward the river, grasped Juanita in his arms, and bidding Carlos run for his life, he plunged into the undergrowth, as the rumble of hundreds of hoofs was heard upon the plain.

"Jump plum into ther drink, Carlos, an' stick yer head up under ther grass ter breathe! Don't make a ripple arter yer gits fixed, er ye're a gone coon. Don't be feared, leetle gal; I'll take keer o' yer!"

Old Rocky's orders were obeyed to the letter.

But a very short time after the disappearance of the trio, along on the bank, in a far-stretching line, dashed a hundred paint-daubed braves; their black eyes blazing with the war-spirit, as they shot fierce glances upon and across the river.

A whoop of disappointment broke from a warrior at the south end of the line, drawing the gaze of all. What they saw was the two sombreros, thrown there by the old scout, floating far down the stream.

This caused many guttural expressions of disappointment from the warriors.

An order from the chief, however, caused a

half down trailers to slip from their animals, toss their jaw- straps to the nearest brave, and proceed to make an examination of the bank.

Over the stream, peeping from the dense foliage, lay Tom and Jack; both having, to their amazement, observed the flying leap of Carlos and Old Rocky; the latter with, as they supposed, Celesta, in his arms, into the river. Neither were aware that their comrades had crossed the stream, much less recovered the Castilian girl, although they had heard the shot and yell, which had puzzled and alarmed them not a little.

The array of warlike savages, that was unexpectedly presented to their view, fairly dazed them; and they concluded that the dangers and difficulties of the past few hours were as nothing compared with those which were to come.

Neither of them dared move a limb, or hardly speak under their breath; for the slightest sound would cause perhaps a score of arrows to be shot into their hiding-place.

However, much to their relief, the Indians whirled their horses, and proceeded to return; doubtless believing that the whites, who had fired the shot and given the yell, had been so terrified at their approach that they had sprung into the river, and been drowned, and carried down by the swift waters beyond their reach.

Jack and Tom were about to arise and endeavor to find some trace of Carlos and Old Rocky, confident, however, that the old scout had in some manner outwitted the Indians, when two braves returned on the run, they being on foot; and, plunging into the river, started to swim across. But, while the two scouts gazed, they making ready to engage the warriors in deadly conflict as quickly as they reached the north bank, both the Indians disappeared beneath the surface; at the same instant two hands, each clutching a knife, arose from the water near the bank, and then were dashed into it.

The next moment there was a violent commotion. The river became dyed with blood, and down the current floated the two savages, scalpless and dead.

Before Jack and Tom had recovered from their surprise, Carlos and Old Rocky, the latter supporting Juanita, swam across, and climbing up the bank, ran into the same thicket which had for some time concealed their pards.

"Dog-gone my forty-second aunt's back ha'r!" cried out the old scout, as he espied Tom and Jack. "Boyees, things is gittin' kinder like biz. Ther red hellyuns air on ther rampage, an' we-uns hes a poor show to save our skull thatches! Hyer air Juanita, an' I'm mighty glad thet we-uns kerral'd her from ther cuss, though we thought she war Celesty. Whar, in thunderation, does yer s'pose ther Angel bees? Take a sot down, an' spit out all yer knows."

Carlos now hung over Juanita, as if his life depended on her words; but her explanations, in a feeble and hesitating voice, indicating bewilderment and most terrible mental anguish, only served to plunge the unhappy young man into still more hopeless despair.

She told the circumstances of her capture when she opened the door leading into the music-room. How she recognized Duke Dudley by the mark of the lash across his face, and that she believed the stranger who sprung toward her to be Cortina, as she had heard the bandits calling for him. She told also that, from the few words which the latter had spoken to her, she believed that he supposed her to be Celesta. But she had not seen her young mistress since she left her in her own apartment.

"We-uns air a passel o' condemned fools!" exclaimed Old Rocky. "Thet cuss of a Dudley hes gut ther leetle gal; but I'll sw'ar I can't see through the way he worked the rifle."

"He an' Cortina war et ther Plaza Bar tergeth—thet's sart'in! An' they loped outen San Antone with each other. But hit gits me whar Celesty war when Duke g'n ther Chap'rell Cock ther slip. One thing air plum' sart'in. Duke daren't glide wi' ther Angel, with any safety to hisself, 'ceptin' Grande-ways. An' another pesky peculiar thing air, whar did thet Will Wild skute tew?"

"He left me with the horses, and rode down the river, saying that he would return," said Carlos.

"Ya-as; so yer told us afore," returned the old scout; "but we-uns bed ter jump our nags, an' spur deep, without waitin' fer him. But, boyees, this hyer ain't no place ter linger. We-uns must freeze ter our nags, er git wo'sted. I'll pick ther caps off'n my six, prime, an' sock dry ones on ther nipples; then we'll skute towards ther critters, an' try ter keep clear o' them pesky reds."

"Things is pannin' out kinder dubious all roun'; but ther old man ain't a-goin' ter crawl inter a rotten tree jist yit. Not much! But thar's bloody biz ahead."

"We'll git kerral'd, dead sure," said Tom, "ef we doesn't levant up er down stream. Thet cuss of a Cortina air a-layin' fer a shot at us, down crick, I'm ormighty sart'in."

"I ain't squeamish 'bout glidin' roun' his locate, but seein' we hes kaliker with us, I'd 'vise thet we strikes up ther Medina, keepin' kiver,

an' hevin' our peepers peeled for ther reds. What d'yer say, Jack?"

"Thet's my opine, clean through," answered Hodge. "One thing is sart'in: I doesn't 'low ter take a siester er chaw bacon until I knows somethin' 'bout ther gal."

Not one of the party gave a thought to the two horsemen seen upon the plain, as none dreamed that they were whites. All believed them to be bandits who had escaped death at Casa Garcia, as Old Rocky had reasoned; and not one of the Texans supposed for a moment that Will Wild had left the vicinity of the past night's conflict.

However, there was no time for a very lengthy consultation.

The only movement that could be made with any chance of safety was to mount at once, or else to lead their horses in close order up the river, and all realized that, at any instant, the Comanche war-cry was liable to sound in their ears.

And up the river they proceeded. Juanita was the only one mounted. The others, with revolvers clutched and at half cock, led their fagged horses slowly along through the timber, taking advantage of the paths made by cattle, or wild beasts.

All was again still. No sounds were heard that would indicate that the Indians were anywhere near them; but this silence was, to the scouts, ominous.

It gave to them more proof of deadly danger than if the galloping of steeds and the fiendish whoop of the savage sounded from across the Rio Medina.

CHAPTER XII.

DUKE DUDLEY AT BAY.

WORDS cannot express the agonizing suspense that now tortured Will Wild, as he galloped toward that bright silvery sheet of slow moving water at the ford below San Jose Mission, after he had seen the angelic face of Celesta Garcia resting upon the shoulder of Duke Dudley.

The young planter frequently looked back along his trail and then his face would show signs of cowardly apprehension. For he expected each moment that the bandit chief, whom he had so meanly duped, would be upon him.

Will Wild, however, as he sped along near the river bank was concealed from the view of Dudley by the line of pecans and a perfect mass of interlaced grape-vines and other climbers.

Never before had Will been so impressed; nay, infatuated by the face of a female. He now registered a mental vow that he would, if it were possible, even by years of devotion and waiting, win the lovely senorita for his wife.

The world seemed brighter and more beautiful, as he gazed into her limpid eyes, and a new and loftier nature seemed born within him.

And when he made the discovery that it was the infamous Duke Dudley who had brought such misery and suffering upon this fair girl and her noble brother; when he found that the dissipated ruffian, who had squandered a fortune that belonged by right to himself would in time, if let alone, sacrifice everything that belonged to him, he was filled with a rage that would have calmed only in the death of Dudley, could he have overtaken him.

Rescue Celesta he would. He would never lose sight of the unfortunate maiden, until he could tear her from the dastard who now, in revenge for the disgrace her brother had justly put upon him, had apparently sworn to bring to ruin and degradation a being who seemed to Will too pure and angelic for this earth.

No more excruciating torture could have been inflicted upon the young man than he now suffered, knowing, as he did, that Celesta was so completely in the power of this miscreant. And this feeling became more intense with him as he thought of the probability that Duke might escape with her.

However, as Will urged his horse madly through the ford after Dudley had disappeared, he congratulated himself upon being mounted upon one of the fleetest steeds of Kentucky; but he was also reminded, after a moment's reflection, that the young planter was riding an animal that, judging from its movements, must be nearly, if not quite as fleet as his own.

Will had not thought it prudent to give a signal yell, knowing that Dudley would be alarmed and would seek to evade him; an easy matter, as Will had never been in the locality before and knew nothing whatever of the character of the country ahead. But there was one thing greatly in his favor; this was, that Duke Dudley had galloped along on a wagon trail, which led away from the ford in a south-easterly direction.

The ground was cut up by wheels and hoofs; but it was soft, and showed the fresh sign, left by the young planter's horse plainly.

The trail was winding, a fact which prevented one from seeing any great distance ahead. But, after galloping two or three miles, to Will's great relief and joy, he broke free from the mesquites, and out upon an open level prairie that stretched as far as the eye could reach southward.

The young man could with difficulty repress

an exultant yell, for, out on the plain half a mile or more in his front, dashed Duke Dudley at headlong speed, clasping his unconscious captive in his grasp, and spurring without mercy.

And Will Wild himself did not spare spurs. But all his exertions toward urging his horse onward, were seemingly futile, for the distance between them did not seem to lessen in the least.

At length when, far ahead, Will discovered a winding dark ribbon of timber, toward which Duke was fast galloping, he became almost frantic; for he was positive that Duke would reach the timber, and take measures to elude him.

Dudley, however, believed that his pursuer was none other than Cortina, dashing after him with most vengeful madness.

He knew that the outlaw chief would cut him to pieces, for the deception he had practiced upon him. He now perceived that his pursuer was gaining upon him, and that nothing but the most cunning strategic movements would save him.

So intent was Duke upon escape, his whole attention being taken up in endeavoring to increase the speed of his horse, that he observed neither the scouts, the Indians, nor Cortina.

But the horsemen, who dashed over the plain, were observed by Will, who was filled with wonder at seeing Cortina dashing at a furious pace toward cover; the scouts apparently in chase. He felt sure that they were the same whom he had been obliged to leave so unceremoniously in the San Antonio bottom timber; their identity being almost positive. The burden, which the bandit bore in his arms, could be nothing else in reason than a human being.

Thus reasoned Will Wild, his eyes still bent upon the man of whom he was in hot pursuit; and he was still perplexed in regard to the unhappy captive. Who could she be? This, however, was only for a moment, for he could not allow his thoughts to wander from his own most determined object—the rescue of Celesta, from Duke the Devil.

Neither the pursued nor the pursuer saw the Indians, as a point of timber hid the red-men from the view of the fast galloping whites. Will felt positive that poor Celesta must be in an unconscious state, and that, if she was not soon released from her present painful position, and given proper attention, she would die. This conviction flashed upon him, as Duke Dudley dashed from view into the timber.

No sooner had he disappeared than Will again became insanely furious, and drawing his bowie, knowing that it would endanger the life of the fair captive if he used his revolver, he drove spurs deep into the flanks of his noble steed, already dripping blood from the previous torture it had received:

On like a madman, his eyes darting glances to the left and right, and ahead of him, striving to pierce through the dense curtains of hanging vines and drooping moss, sprung Will Wild; the expression of his face not belieing his assumed name. Fruitless would have been this headlong dash, had not the formation of the ground providentially favored the cause of right and justice; for Duke Dudley could easily have eluded pursuit, had he entered the bottom timber at any point other than the one he selected.

The young planter forced his horse into terrific speed as he approached the woods, his object being to plunge directly toward the river, until it was within view, and then turn abruptly up or down the stream, secreting himself, his horse, and captive, in some thicket.

Thus concealed, where even an experienced scout would not be likely, without close inspection, to find him, Duke knew that he could shoot this man, with no danger to himself.

Much to his relief, just previous to entering the timber, he recognized his pursuer as the stranger he had seen reflected in the mirror in the parlor of Casa Garcia, and later, upon the waterspouts with Carlos, when Cortina and he had fired their revolvers at them. The strange youth had the appearance of being recently from the States, and Duke had no doubt that he could elude, and kill him easily.

But in this, he reckoned without his host. His horse had not made a dozen bounds through the undergrowth, when the animal plunged down a gradually shelving bank, into a deep gully that had been washed out by heavy rains on the plain beyond, which slope toward the river.

The banks of this gully were some ten feet high, the tops overhanging in such a manner as to cause it to be impossible for any man or animal to surmount them; and as Duke Dudley urged his horse down this gully, with the intention of plunging into the river, and swimming across it, he found, to his great consternation and terror, that the mouth of this wash-out, at the junction of the same with the river, was entirely blocked up. The obstruction was caused by a jam of logs, and was clearly impassable.

The hideously scarred face of Dudley became ghastly with dread. He was so appalled, at being thus "corraled," as to be for the moment

almost helpless. The hope, that his pursuer would miss the gully, was soon banished, to be replaced by the most utter loss of confidence.

He had not, for some time, been able to take his attention from his horse, upon which all had depended, for such a length of time as to get his brandy bottle from his saddle-bags, and brace himself by a stiff drink; and now his nerves were quivering, his eyes fixed and staring, as down the bushy decline dashed Will Wild, his right hand clutching his bowie-knife.

Down dashed man and horse, both perfect models of their kind, an avalanche of strength, fired by fury and determined action in the rider, and the horse forced forward by the momentum born of its terrific speed and downward plunge.

Swift as an arrow flew the avenger, guiding his steed close up to the left of the horse of Duke Dudley; and, before the latter could raise his bowie to meet him, the blade of Will pierced his left shoulder. At the same instant, Celesta Garcia was torn from his grasp, the animal of Will dashing toward the barricade of logs, and there coming to a halt. Will dismounted quickly, and carefully laid the beautiful and seemingly dead maiden upon a mass of sward, that had fallen from the bank above. Then, like a flash, he jerked his revolver, at the same time bounding forward toward Duke Dudley, with the weapon presented, as he yelled:

"Duke Dudley! Vile dastard that you are! I could shoot you through the heart, but I scorn to take cowardly advantages that you have taken through life. Throw up your hands! Quick! For my blood is up, and I might forget myself."

Palyzed with terror, Duke Dudley instinctively obeyed the order, without even a show of resistance; the mad impetuosity of the stranger seeming to change, for the time being, his usual desperate daring into the most abject fear and despair.

Especially was this so, when Will made a bound to his side, and placing his revolver to his heart, jerked the villain's six-shooter from his belt, casting the weapon, in his fury, to the most distant corner of the gully.

Then again Will Wild accosted his captive enemy.

"Duke Dudley," he said, in a cold, steely voice, "we meet again under far different circumstances than those when you last visited your old home, and fled from thence in the night to save your neck from the rope!

"Dismount, Duke Dudley, and fight! Will Wildom, a name by which I have been known from infancy, and which I shall retain—as my real name, which you unjustly bear, and have disgraced most damnably, I have no desire ever to assume. But the wealth and station you have enjoyed, through your father's desire to avenge himself upon my father, that I shall wrest from you!

"Dismount, I say! Carlos Garcia has left his mark upon your villainous face. I will add another, and then leave you to the tender mercy of the young Castilian, who is now searching not far from here for his sister, whom you—craven that you are!—had no right to look upon, much less pollute by your foul touch!

"Dismount, I say, and meet a man who takes no advantage, and who allows no advantage to be taken.

"Come! The man whose shoes you have worn, whose wealth you have enjoyed, whose friends you have in the most outrageous manner assaulted, linking yourself for the purpose, with a notorious outlaw and assassin, that you might accomplish your cowardly ends—that man is before you. I, Will Wildom, of Kentucky!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

SAVED AND LOST.

It would be impossible to describe the strange expression that rested upon the face of Duke Dudley as Will spoke.

Amazement, wonder and dread were mingled, and his staring eyes that were fixed, as if their muscles refused to do their natural duty, seemed filled with superstitious awe, as if he saw before him a scene conjured up in his disordered imagination, and could not believe it to be true.

However, the words of Will in his challenge to combat, and his assertions, which were far beyond any semblance of truth in Duke's estimation, together with the domineering manner of the man, whom he now remembered as a neighbor in humble circumstances in Kentucky—all this gradually caused the young planter to boil over with fury, and he sprang from his horse, the wound which he had received in his left shoulder being but slight, and not in the least interfering with the proposed duello with bowie knives.

Duke Dudley's horse walked slowly to the base of the decline and there stood, nipping the leaves from the low bushes. There was rest for him, though not for his rider.

The black steed belonging to Will also wandered to the same spot, leaving the two men in the middle of the gully, with a clear even space some ten feet wide and double that in length for the approaching conflict.

The rescued maiden lay upon the patch of sward, in appearance like an angel that had fallen from the skies, so beautiful and yet so deathlike, that it seemed impossible to connect her with earth, and especially so with her present wild surroundings.

The two men who faced each other near her resting-place, their eyes flashing with murderous hate and an unnatural craving for revenge, had, for the time, no thought of her, or of aught but themselves.

Not a word spoke Duke Dudley, who, as he lighted from his horse, grasped his saddle-bags and quickly clutched the brandy bottle which he had brought from the Plaza Bar, gluing it to his lips, taking a deep draught.

"That's characteristic of you, Duke Dudley," said Will, in a sneering voice. "Pour down the poison that has been your curse, that has made you what you are, that has brought you to degradation, dastardly crime, and affiliation with desperate bandits. My arm is nerved by the God of justice and needs no false stimulant. Come! I am eager to punish the vile coward who tears defenseless maidens from their happy homes to drag them to a fate worse than death!"

Will Wild was magnificent in his righteous anger.

His manly form was erect, his handsome face flushed, his bowie clutched firmly, and his dark eyes shooting the most contemptuous glances upon his adversary. As he spoke he stepped quickly forward in a firm manner, and without excitement, every look and motion proving him no novice in the use of the knife.

This fact was at once apparent to Dudley, who, inflamed by the drink he had just taken, had at first been confident that the duel would be to him but child's play.

However, there was no escape. There was now no way of avoiding the fight. Duke, therefore promptly stepped forward, his evil face distorted with fiendish hate, his form slightly bent. The two men were both possessed of unusual strength, were of equal size and height, which last was far above the average.

For a moment both stood within four paces of each other, each looking into the eyes of his antagonist, in the endeavor to read the point of the intended thrust.

They remained thus only a moment. Then each bounded toward the other with the most desperate fury.

Bowie clicked against bowie. Bright steel flashed, darted and revolved in a lightning-like manner. They clashed and glinted in the early sunlight, until both men were forced to pause from their almost superhuman efforts to overcome each other. Roland had met his Oliver.

They panted laboriously, and yet neither of them had so much as scratched the skin of the other.

Again they met in mad fight. Again there was a fast and furious play of steel; then, with a cry, that was half howl and half yell, Duke Dudley sprang to one side, clapping his hand to his head as he did so.

Between the fingers ran thickly the streams of blood.

"I told you I would mark you, Duke Dudley!" said Will Wild, in a taunting voice. "Pick up your ear and put it in your bullet-pouch. You may have a chance to get it sewed on again—who knows?"

"Come, I say! Here goes for the other one!"

There was no need, however, for Will to make use of his last words, for Duke sprang at him like a panther, his appearance now being little short of horrible. The side of his head was covered with blood. The livid mark of the quirt of Carlos Garcia, in addition, caused the young planter to seem almost unhuman and terrifying.

Unexpected as was Duke's movement, Will was, as at the first, ready for him. The desperate struggle was now most terrible, there being for a time an almost continuous clash and click of deadly steel.

Again rung that howl of agony, mingled this time with dread horror. Duke Dudley staggered backward, his bowie falling from his grasp to the earth, while he pressed a hand upon each side of his head, the streams of blood trickling between the fingers of each and running down to his wrists and into his sleeves, while his terrified gaze was fixed in dread apprehension upon his adversary, expecting the knife of the latter to be sheathed in his body.

The reckless, daring and desperate bravado look vanished from the face of Dudley, which now became drawn with agony. But only for a few moments did he gaze upon Will Wild, who now stood, erect, exultant and bantering, ready for another trial of muscle and dexterity.

Will had apparently been untouched, and a most provoking sneer rested upon his lips as he said:

"You are now marked and branded in true Texas style, Duke Dudley! Branded by the lash, a fitting weapon with which to chastise such as you. Do you hear me? But I forgot—you have no ears. Duke Dudley, your career of crime approaches its end; and that end will, I am positive, be a most terrible one, although I am determined your blood shall not be on my hands!"

With a howl like that of a wounded beast—a sound that was anything but human in expression—the young planter grasped his knife from the ground; then, as he half arose, quick as thought he sprang forward upon Will, at the same time making a powerful thrust. But his knife arm was thrown aside by a dexterous parry, and the object of Duke Dudley was defeated.

Then the clinched fist of Will shot forward, and Duke fell to the earth as if a bullet had pierced his brain.

There he lay senseless, a blood-stained, hideous object, from which the eye of man would turn away in horror.

No sooner did Will strike that terrible blow than he sprang over his prostrate adversary and led the horse of the young planter to where its master lay.

Detaching the lariat from the neck of the animal, and removing the saddle and bridle, Will, with a strength born of most intense madness, grasped Duke Dudley and threw him upon the back of the horse, securing him, Mazeppa-like, with the lariat. Then, leading the affrighted animal out from the gully by the same way by which he had entered, he pricked the beast with his bowie, causing it to snort and bound away through the bottom timber and rapidly down the bank of the stream.

For a few seconds Will stood at the top of the decline, gazing after the fast-flying steed, with its horrible, blood-stained burden; then, as if in an instant, Celesta was brought to his mind, and he darted back into the wash-out.

So enraged had the young man been during the desperate duel, as he recalled all his own wrongs and all the agony and anguish that his adversary had caused to others; so filled was he with hatred and a desire, at the same time, to avoid being the death of the man into whose heart he longed to plunge his knife; so determined to degrade and mark Duke Dudley, even worse than Carlos had done, to revenge himself by causing the young planter to be an object of ridicule; so strong was this passion and this determination that, during all the intense excitement, all else was banished from his mind—even the fact that Celesta, who ruled his heart of hearts, and caused his present wild fury and longing for vengeance; the fact that this angelic girl, whom he had rescued from Duke Dudley, lay senseless, perhaps dead, in the gully below him, was forgotten!

Now, as he rushed back, when he had recalled the incidents preceding the duel, in frantic haste toward the barricade of logs, his strongest feeling was that of self-reproach.

Suddenly Will Wild stopped in his tracks, clapped his hand to his forehead, and reeled like a man stricken with palsy. His face became ghastly, his eyes glared with an anguish that was unspeakable, a dread amazement stamped on every feature of his pale face.

There, at his feet, was the mass of sward that had fallen from the bank, the grass upon it crumpled and pressed flat where he had laid the senseless form of the maiden he had rescued, but—she was gone!

Nothing that had life was anywhere within view, except his horse. No sign, no trace whatever of the angelic girl whom he now loved more than life!

The helpless and insensible condition in which he had found her, her deathlike beauty of face, and the fact that he had saved her from a terrible fate, all caused his former love for her to increase tenfold.

Yet she was gone! Stolen, taken, it was more than probable, when he had been insanely eager for revenge; when he had secured Duke Dudley upon his horse, and sent him off upon his wild, involuntary ride.

Taken, to punish him for carrying his mad vengeance beyond reason; for being so much under the influence of passion as to be not himself!

No, it could not be! He would not think it. Such a thing would be neither just nor reasonable.

The great God would not punish him in such a way, by plunging an innocent maiden, already on the border of death from her previous great wrongs.

This would not be right nor just.

These thoughts flashed through Will's mind; and then he recovered himself sufficiently to crowd down his intense anguish, and he sunk upon his knees to examine the ground for sign of the missing one.

At that moment the sound of heavy bodies striking the ground around him, caused Will to make an effort to spring to his feet; but bronzed arms, with sinews of steel, clutched him, and bound him fast.

Snake-like eyes shot glances of exultation, from between bars of war-paint, and feather-bedizened, war-gear'd braves were on all sides of him.

Will knew that the Indians must have sprung upon him from the bank above him. He also knew that Celesta Garcia was now a captive, in the hands of the merciless Comanches!

With wrists bound securely behind him, Will was now driven forward to the barricade of logs, and forced to climb to the bank above.

There, outstretched upon the sword, was the poor Castilian girl, one brave guarding her, and the other five having himself in charge.

There was one thought which gave the young man hope.

He knew that the scouts must be near at hand.

He gazed fixedly upon the fair captive girl, and as he did so her eyes opened listlessly, and then became filled with horror, as the paint-daubed fiends met her view. Then, as she perceived Will Wild, this look of dread seemed partially to vanish.

His eyes, as they met hers, spoke of love and hope; and, dread as had been her experiences, she had the utmost trust in the brave and noble young man, though he now stood a captive before her.

A prisoner though he was like herself, she felt that she was not deserted; that her prayers had been heard, and he had been sent, and would rescue her.

It was for a short time only that the captives were left in this position. A guttural order now came from the throat of one of the braves, and horses were led from a thicket. Celesta and Will were mounted upon two of these, a brave leading each, while three of the Indians sprung upon other steeds, the remaining warrior hastening after the black horse of Will Wild, which he soon led from the wash-out.

All then entered the undergrowth, and proceeded slowly down the bank of the river.

CHAPTER XXIV. ESCAPE OF CORTINA.

OLD ROCKY and his party proceeded up the river, through the timber, with great caution, the men leading their horses. For a half-mile they thus traveled, and yet not a sound nor sight of the Comanche war-party was heard or discovered.

As they arrived at that little distance from the point where Juanita had been rescued from Cortina, and where they had been forced to plunge into the river to save their lives, Old Rocky gave a low signal.

They were at this time, in a small natural "open," the same being surrounded by towering trees and dense undergrowth, but itself covered with a thick carpet of bottom-grass, which, as they now halted, the horses tore with avidity from the sod, although their bridles were not slipped.

"Boyees," said the old scout, in a low tone of voice, "all on yer stop right hyer, until I show up, er yer knows from my chin-music that I air gone up. I doesn't like this biz et all. Hit's too ornighly still, an' I wants to find out what ther condemned cusses o' painted heathens air a-doin'."

"We-uns wants ter git from this-a-way, an' prospect fer Duke Dudley an' ther leetle gal, 'bout es fast es we kin make ther raffle. I'll smell out ther hellyuns, er w'ar my clo's out a-crawlin'. So long!"

"Be kinder keerful, ole pard!" warned Jack Hodge.

"Spit out a yell ef yer gits inter hefty biz!" said Tom.

For half an hour the old scout was absent, during which time those left in the little "open" were tortured with anxiety in regard to Old Rocky.

They were also much apprehensive of their own safety, knowing the Indians might strike their trail down stream, follow the same, and crawl in on them.

In such an event they would inevitably be butchered.

However, their minds were at length relieved by the sudden appearance of the old scout, whose features were expressive of hope and relief, as he said:

"Dang ther chalk aig thet my great gran'-mother used ter fool her bestest ole hen with! Yer see, boyees, hit air jist this-a-way. When I war in ther Rockies—"

"Let up on thet, ole pard!" interrupted Jack. "Wait until some other time. We-uns hes bin squatted hyer 'bout es long es ther ole hen used ter set, I reckon. Wh'ar in thunder is ther reds? What kep' yer so long nosin' roun' ther bottom? Thet's what we-uns wants ter know."

"I never glides speedy, Jack, when thar may be a hellyun ready ter jump me in every dang'd bush. I've see'd 'em, an' I'm ornighly full o' glad thet I skuted thet way; fer I feels a heap better since I've bin clean over ther drink, an' within a leetle ways o' whar ther cussed painted kiotes air squatted."

"They air jist on ther edge o' ther timber, an' 'lowin' thar critturs ter t'ar grass. An' ther animiles needs hit bad. I'm a-bettin thar hain't a nag in ther hull Injun outfit c'u'd run down a fat spring turkey in ther fall."

"Fact air, boyees, ther reds hes been on ther war-trail on t'other side o' ther Nueces, I reckon, an' gut run like thunder by some o' ther mustangs. One thing air sartin—though our nags ain't zac'ly peart in slingin' hoofs, yit I'm a-gamblin' we-uns kin shoot right ahead ef hit comes ter a run fer ha'r."

"Leastways I ain't 'tall puckery 'bout ther gills, 'gards gittin' back O.K. But I'd like mighty well ter kinder flop roun' up crick an'

skute north by 'nother trail, hopin' ter run ag'in' thet or'nary cuss, Duke Dudley."

"Come on! We'll levant toward ther perrarer, an' ef thar's a fa'r show we kin light out on ther buz; fer, ef ther reds should huff it over ther drink, leavin' ther nags ter pull grass, they mought run in on us an' skin our heads, 'speshly ef we lays 'roun' hyer like a passel o' kiotes what's full o' bufler-meat!"

The loquacity and apparent unconcern of Old Rocky cheered up the entire party, and they followed him toward the east plain, or the border of the timber, where they could get a good view of the same.

This point was soon reached, and an inspection proved that the coast was clear; yet the old scout advised a longer stay in cover to allow the animals their much-needed rest before making a break on the back trail.

Not more than ten minutes, however, had elapsed since they reached the edge of the timber, when, as they were all seated in the bushes, they were made to bound to their feet by the sudden breaking out of a series of yells over the river, the same seeming to rapidly approach their covert.

Every man sprung to the side of his horse ready to mount, Tom preparing to take Juanita in his arms in case they were forced to gallop from the timber.

With their senses on the alert, ready to fight or fly, the scouts waited the approach of those whom they well knew must be Indians. The occasion of the tumult was certainly a mystery, but not long to remain so.

From the sound of crushing brush, the scouts were able to make out the course of the approaching party of horsemen; and they felt certain they would break cover, and dash out on the plain but a short distance to the north of their position.

Leading their horses to the verge of the border of bushes, they peered out upon the plain and witnessed a sight that filled them with amazement—that was petrifying!

The first that met their astonished vision was Cortina the Scourge, the Bandit of the Bravo, who dashed madly from the woods upon the same horse that he had ridden from the fandango to Casa Garcia.

As the outlaw broke cover, they all saw that he held the end of a lariat in his hand, indicating that he had an animal in the lead, the face of the outlaw being filled with vengeful triumph.

An instant more and another horse sprung from the bushes, the lariat held by Cortina being secured about this animal's neck. All recognized this last horse as being that of Duke Dudley, and this helped them to decide more quickly who was the blood-stained being that was bound upon the back of the steed.

The mark of the quirt-lash across the face, which was turned toward the thunderstruck observers, would have proved this, although it was nearly hidden by blood.

"Dang my ole heart!" exclaimed the old scout, in amazement.

"Duke Dudley air dished, er I'm a bug-eatin' Piute!" said Jack Hodge, in mingled wonder and satisfaction at the sight.

"Ther Chap'rell Cock hes kerral'd Duke, dang'd ef he hain't, an' I wouldn't be in his clo's fer ther bull o' ther Lone Star State!" said Tom Clark.

The eyes of Carlos Garcia blazed with fury, his teeth grated together and his face contorted with an insane thirst for revenge, as he strove to spring upon his horse, with the intention of dashing in pursuit of his enemy—the man who had, as he felt sure, abducted his sister. But Old Rocky caught him by the arm and held him back, saying:

"Easy, easy, Carlos! Hit'll all come out hunk. Keep ye'r idees squar' a leetle longer. Jist listen ter me a minit! Ef yer hed skuted outen ther bush ye'd be hashed inter cat-fish bait in two shakes of a big-horn's crupper-holder. I tell yer ther solemn fac'."

"Listen, boyees! We-uns hes ther front seats in ther biggest circus we hes seen o' late. Ef we hain't I'll chaw snakes fer grub fer ther nex' six moons sure."

But there was no need to listen. The din was now deafening. Nearly a hundred Comanches, dashing through and over the undergrowth, all yelling like fiends, in hot pursuit of Cortina and the apparently dead captive of the bandit chief, who was bound fast to his horse, now flashed like a grand panorama before their eyes.

Away over the plain they went, the Indians, knowing full well that they must secure the white man and his strangely-bound captive by circling around them, and that it must be done quickly or not at all, as their animals, in their present condition, could not stand a long run.

Two long lines of red braves, one after the other, sped out toward the east and west in the shape of a V, the two points aiming to get ahead and inclose Cortina. They nearly succeeded, from the fact that the horse of Duke Dudley was now in a bad condition, having been cruelly torn by the spurs in the race from Will Wild. The bandit chief had a better start from the scouts, and had not been forced to use his animal very roughly. This, too, he saw plainly.

But Cortina was forced to drop the lariat, without, however, being much disappointed, for he knew that the Indians would butcher the man who had been so treacherous in his dealings with him, and whom, to his great surprise and joy, he had found bound to the horse, the animal galloping wildly through the bottom-timber.

The state in which he found Duke Dudley, he being earless, and stained from head to foot with gore, was as much a puzzling mystery to Cortina as it was to the scouts.

The outlaw dropped the lariat, and the strangely-burdened steed bore off toward the northwest, while Cortina dashed southeast, at the best speed he could urge his horse into, resolved to return to the Rio Grande, as he had been defeated in everything he had attempted on this most eventful and disastrous raid.

The Comanches now divided their forces, one-half going in chase of the bandit chief, the other after Duke Dudley. The scouts were greatly amazed, as well as gratified, at seeing the terrible predicament in which Cortina and the young planter were—threatened with a fate which they had, both of them, richly merited.

However, but a little time elapsed before the scouts realized that the outlaw would escape, as indeed he always did from the most desperate positions of danger in which he might be caught, and they knew as well that he was confident of his safety.

For, from a position far in advance of his red pursuers, the bandit chief waved his sombrero above his head in a taunting and exultant farewell, his horse speeding like a dry leaf before the gale, in a wide circling course toward the river. This he could ford, and then dash back, without fear of pursuit, to his outlaw horde on the Rio Grande.

No sooner did Old Rocky perceive Duke Dudley, as he lay bound upon the horse and covered with blood, than thoughts and reasonings flashed like lightning through his mind.

He knew that Cortina had dashed down the river at the time when Juanita was rescued, and that the bandit had given a yell and had shot at him.

He knew that he must have come up the stream with Duke Dudley, or he would not have been discovered by the Indians. And not only this, but he must have been on the opposite side of the river to have been observed. The dripping of water, and the wet sides of the horses, were sufficient to prove this conclusively.

Like a flash of light the fact that he had observed two horsemen on the plain, to the west of them, as he and his pards were in chase of Cortina, darted through the old scout's mind, and he felt very positive—indeed, he had no doubt whatever—that Duke Dudley was one of the two. But then, who was the other?

The triumphant expression on the face of the bandit chief was easily explained. It indicated that the outlaw despised and hated his former ally, and was disposed to enjoy to the full his revenge, in anticipation.

Had he wished to save the life of Dudley, had he entertained any regard for him, the bandit could have kept to the timber and still had a chance to escape with the young planter. But it appeared as though Cortina's object was to deliver Duke over to the Indians.

The fact that he had thought it strange that Dudley was not in company with the bandit chief at the time when the latter left the vicinity of Casa Garcia with Juanita was now recalled, and Old Rocky immediately decided that Duke had deserted his outlaw friend at a time when the latter most needed him.

These thoughts gave birth to others. True, they were but suspicions, but they were strong enough, notwithstanding, to cause the old scout to be greatly excited. There were two important actors in the recent tragic drama still absent—Celesta Garcia and Will Wild.

One of the horsemen whom Old Rocky had observed on the plain west of him in their pursuit of Cortina, had held in his arms a burden, the other had been riding in the rear, and both had been in a mad gallop.

Was not, then, the leading horseman Duke Dudley?

And did he not carry with him the Castilian girl?

These questions were mentally asked by the old scout, and each of them received quickly a mental answer.

This view of the case was not only possible, but more than probable; and no sooner did Old Rocky thus decide than giving one glance out upon the plain, and observing that the horse of Duke Dudley was keeping on far in advance of the pursuing red-men, and that it was headed westerly, he yelled:

"Jump yer critturs, boyees! Thar's bin some kind of a circus up crick what we hesn't 'tended, an' I'm ther boss liar o' West Texas ef Will Wild an' ther angel o' ther Alamo City hain't been mixed in wi' this hyer Duke Dudley biz! Come on lively, Tom! Skute ahead, I say—huff it. An' gi'n us ther word ef yer dis-kivers a openin' fer any kind o' slashin'."

"No shootin' in this lay out, er we'll none on us git back ter Casa Garcia. Juanita, my leetle gal, keep a stiff upper lip an' ride ahint. Jack'll

keep a eye on yer, an' ef I ain't fooled mighty bad we'll strike ther trail o' ther seniorita an' thet Will Wild.

"Open yer peepers, an' keep 'em on double duty! Carlos, git ready ter carve red meat ef thar's any o' ther sneakin' cusses ahead. Thar is some a-missin' what ain't on ther stompede arter Duke Dudley.

"Easy now, an' no chin-waggin'. All set. Hyer we go!"

Tom Clark shot ahead, his bowie in hand, as directed by the old scout, and all hands followed.

Old Rocky, however, knowing best how the land lay, took the lead of the little party, who were now more more than encompassed by danger and death.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DASH FOR LIBERTY.

CROSSING the side trail made by the galloping warriors who had sped in a scattered mob through the timber, crushing the undergrowth beneath the hoofs of their half-wild steeds, Tom Clark proceeded up the river, making halt at the far side of the wide trail, until Old Rocky broke into the same, and understood by a gesture from Tom, in which way he must now proceed.

The trail was now quickly crossed by the entire party, and they were once more in the dense shades.

Half bent, Tom walked as rapidly as he could onward, avoiding making any more movement than was unavoidable among the branches, or allowing the dry limbs to crack beneath his feet. Thus on, stealing silently, with every sense upon the alert, his bowie in his hand, his gaze directed ahead, now and then breaking a green branch partly off, leaving the same to hang downward as a guide to the old scout who slowly followed him.

Thus he went on, curving toward the river until quite near it, at a point where beasts of all kinds made a trail as they went up and down stream; a trail that was here plainly outlined for three feet in width, and comparatively free from bushes.

Here Tom paused at the very edge of the bordering bushes, to gaze up and down this trail, previous to entering upon it and exposing himself to view.

And well was it for all concerned that he did so. For afar up the trail, which for a rifle-shot in distance was almost perfectly straight, he saw the flaunting feathers and hideous painted face of a mounted Indian brave, who was just coming into view around a curve in the trail.

An instant more and another paint-daubed fiend broke into view; and then, close following was a beautiful maiden bound upon a horse, her pale features turned heavenward as if in prayer, her wealth of raven black hair hanging in disordered masses about her shoulders, and down over her rich but now sadly tattered apparel. Tom saw and recognized her.

A fierce oath broke from his lips, an oath of blended fury and satisfaction; for at the first glance he knew that his search was at an end—he was gazing at Celesta Garcia, the Angel of the Alamo City!

Without a moment's hesitation Tom darted like a frightened buck back on his trail, and in a very short time stood by the side of Old Rocky's horse.

In a quick but low tone he gave out his important news—important indeed, but startling even to the old scout.

"I hes see'd ther red hellyuns, an' they hes got ther gal, sure 'nough. Come on, ole pard! I'll lead yer ter a p'int whar we kin resky her, or die a-tryin'."

"Dog-gone my old heart, Tom Clark ye're a brick! Boyees, glide arter us! Juanita, skute along easy like ahint us, an' yer'll soon see Celesty right side up with care, or else ther ole man'll be flat on his back with his head skinned. Now fer it, boyees!"

All were instantly gliding at right angles with their former course, being led directly toward the river to a point below that at which Tom had discovered the Comanches with their captive.

The edge of the trail was soon reached, and the scouts dismounted, securing their horses amid the bushes some twenty feet from the trail, down which the Comanches were coming.

Juanita, quivering with terror, and pale as death itself, was left alone in charge of the horses of the little party.

Tom, who had no need to secure, sprung at once to gaze up the trail, when, to his great astonishment, he saw that a white man of magnificent physique was also a captive. This last was bound to a horse in the rear of the line, but an Indian followed after as guard.

This intelligence was immediately communicated to the old scout, with what effect upon him may be imagined.

"Hit's Will Wild, sure es shootin'!" asserted Old Rocky. "I knows it afore I fastens my peepers onter him. Thar hain't no mistookin' thet diagnose. Ther ole man sifted ther biz in his brain-box fore he started on this hyer side trail, an' things is pannin' out jist es he 'spected.

"Lay low, boyees, an' git ready ter slash

speedy! Strike hum wi' yer stickers, an' choke off ther yells ef yer kin. Carlos an' I'll tend ther reds ahint an' afore ther leetle gal. Jack an' Tom, yer kin hash ther cusses aighest ter Will, and then cut him loose.

"Ef t'other two hellyuns stan's thar groun' we'll scoop 'em in, but ef they skutes we-uns must make huffs fly up crick mighty suddint, or ther hull pack o' painted perrarer piruts'll stompede arter us, fer they'll gi'n up chasin' Duke Dudley, I'm dead sure an' sartin."

"Pick yer persish now, boyees, an' don't take a breath hard enough ter shake a leaf. Make a dead thing on desectin' yer meat, an' we'll make ther rifle!"

The old scout spoke in a low but rapid voice. His directions were immediately obeyed; all stationing themselves in positions that were favorable to their chances of success in the struggle that was at hand.

And never did men thus stationed gaze upon a sight that was calculated to nerve them more, and fill them with the most desperate determination than the scouts. More especially was this the case with Carlos Garcia, who saw his only and beloved sister rudely bound among these savages; her intense anguish and agony, both mental and physical, being plainly revealed in her face and in every movement.

The fair girl was indeed a picture of the deepest despair, as she rode thus helpless amid a file of war-painted and merciless Comanches.

Clutching his cuchillo, the young Castilian could scarce wait for a favorable opportunity to bury it in the heart of one of the slowly advancing braves; who, having heard the yells of their comrades, were now suspicious of some danger, of the character of which they were ignorant.

The density of the thicket which bordered the trail, caused it to be impossible for the scouts to be discovered by the Indians, and the latter came on, unsuspecting of any danger at such a distance from the point at which the recent alarm had been given by their fellow braves.

The first knowledge of lurking foes came to the paint daubed warriors when it was too late for any resistance.

Four desperate and determined men, infuriated by hate, and with a score of massacres in their minds, sprung into the trail as one man, and with strength that was doubled by the sight of the helpless and tortured maiden before them. Each man, as he dashed forward grasped the Indian that he had selected by the hair of the head, jerked the startled brave downward, and buried his knife to the hilt in his vitals.

The mustangs sprung into the air, snorting with sudden fright; blood spurted afar out, bespattering the green foliage and sweet flowers, while groans and howls of dread and agony, the most deadly, filled the air.

The two remaining braves sat their mustangs for a moment, as if horror-stricken; they then jerked bow and arrow from their quivers, but before the deadly shafts were fitted to the strings, Jack and Old Rocky were upon them.

A horrible grating of steel, quickly plunged through the bone, and the sickening slashing of flesh, followed by spurring blood and gurgling death-yells, and all was over. The six braves lay in the trail, all with the most terrible gaping wounds made by the bowie-knives of the scouts, all covered with gore; all dead!

Carlos, as quickly as he had dispatched the warrior in front of Celesta, sprung to her side, cut the bonds, and drew the suffering girl to the earth.

Tom Clark immediately cut the bonds of Will Wild, and then, as Old Rocky saw that everything was as it should be, that his directions had been carried out to the letter, he yelled:

"Hump yerselves, boyees! Jack, glide arter thernags an' Juanita. We-uns must skute from hyer mighty suddint, er git scooped in by ther red hellyuns."

"Jump critters, an' foller ther ole man! Will, how-d'ye, ole boy? Reckon yer hes bin takin' a leetle West Texas in yourn; but we'll sling gab arter we gits outen this hyer cuss of a hole. Carlos an' Will kin take keer o' ther leetle gal. How-d'ye, seniorita? Mighty full o' glad ter see yer with yer back ha'r on hit's usual locate. We-uns'll glide back ter Casa Garcia, an' then we'll be all hunk. Jack, take keer o' Juanita, my boy! All set?"

"All set," replied Jack and Tom, in chorus.

"Levant!" ordered the old scout.

All now hastened up the trail, from whence the Indians and their captives had just come.

Will Wild, on the instant of being cut loose, had rushed to the side of Celesta, and Carlos received for his sister the words of congratulation and regard, to which she was, as yet, unable to reply. The beautiful maiden, however, expressed by her glance the gratitude that she felt, although she could only but surmise that the young stranger had saved her from the infamous Duke Dudley.

Hearty greetings were exchanged all around, during the time that Old Rocky was giving his final directions; but Jack, Tom, Will and Carlos were springing lively, in an instant after, to obey the same. Will now secured his own horse. One of the mustangs of the Indians was caught for Juanita; and in an incredibly short

space of time the whole party were speeding up the trail. A full mile was passed before the old scout led the way to the edge of the timber, where a clear view of the plain, in the direction of San Antonio could be obtained.

Afar to the west was a moving black object on the wide-stretching prairie, and this Old Rocky pointed out.

"Boyees an' weemin folkses! Thar's Duke Dudley jist a-hummin'. He's a-playin' circus, but he orter l'arn ter dance; fer he'll hev ter tramp hot coals when he glides whar he's a-goin'. He war too dang'd mean an' or'nary fer even ther pesky reds ter bother tharselves 'bout, an' he's still a-glidin' on this hyer yearth; but hit won't be fer long, I reckon. Thar ain't a red in sight, an' thet looks dang'd dub'ous an' full o' suspich. We'd better p'int fer Casa Garcia, an' git up an' git putty lively et thet, er we'll mebbe so be scooped in yit!"

At this moment a series of the most fearful howls rung through the arches of the bottom timber down the river, and once more the old scout yelled:

"Drive spurs deep, boyees, fer ther red ha'r-farers hev run ag'in' thar scarified pards, an' they'll be on our trail in two skips of a bad skered jack-rabbit!"

There was little need, however, for the warning words of Old Rocky. The horrible howls were now most blood-curdling, and they told the hearers more plainly than any language could have done that they must ride like the wind if they did not wish to meet the most terrible of deaths.

And on over the plain dashed our friends at the greatest speed that their animals could maintain, gaining such a distance before the Indians broke cover at the point where the trail of the Texans led out from the timber to the plain, that the Comanches did not give chase.

They knew very well that the whites could reach a point where great danger would threaten themselves before they could be overtaken, if, indeed, overtaking them was one of the possibilities of life.

With wild, ringing yells of disappointment and terrible howls of fury, the Comanches retired into the timber to bury their dead. They then hastened, beyond pursuit, toward their camp on the Upper Nueces.

When they found that the Indians were not in chase, our friends allowed their animals to go at a slow pace, out of humane feelings for the beautiful Castilian girl and her maid, both of whom were now in a state of nervous prostration and weakness, and also in consideration for their already overtaxed horses.

The shades of evening had fallen upon Casa Garcia, when the scouts, Will Wild, Carlos and the rescued maidens walked their fagged horses through the mesquites and came within view of the garden wall.

It was with feelings of the most heartfelt gratitude and intense relief that Celesta and Juanita again entered the chamber from which they had been so rudely carried away, and threw themselves upon their knees in prayers of thankfulness for their preservation from death, and worse than death, and from all the dread perils through which they had passed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SECOND VISIT FROM DUKE DUDLEY.

THE ranger, who had been left at Casa Garcia, in charge of the wounded, reported the latter as doing well, the surgeon having returned to his home. But the latter was again summoned; this time, to attend to the rescued, and now exhausted maidens, who, after nourishing drinks and sedatives had been administered, were soon in the land of pleasant dreams.

The scouts now ascertained that the mob of citizens that had galloped in pursuit of Cortina and Duke Dudley, had returned, much disgusted and ashamed of their own conduct, in not having waited for the counsel of Old Rocky.

A number of these men had busied themselves in removing all traces of the fight from about Casa Garcia, burying the dead bandits in one ditch together, amid the mesquites, and interring the slain rangers on Powder House Hill.

All would have gladly gone to the rescue, and the assistance of the scouts, had they known what direction to take; but the course traveled by the bandit chief and Duke Dudley, after leaving Commerce street, was unknown, and it had been impossible for them to decide on it.

Casa Garcia, when the scouts returned to it, was quiet; the citizens being then at the Plaza Bar, each trying to tell all that he knew in regard to the startling advent of Cortina in their midst, and the outrageous actions of the young planter. But Lingsweider looked upon them all with contempt, as he did not hesitate to tell them, one after another, when they brought their narratives to a close.

"Tam it, shendlemens, you knows nodings at all!" so said the bar-keeper, with contempt, when they had concluded.

"I vos play von game of beker mit Gerdena und dot Juke, vile dey sits on dare hosses, und I squets on dot par. Und, ven dey skutes off mitout bayin' fer dot prandy, I shoos off dot Gerdena's eye-winkers, py tam!"

"Ef dot boss vot he ride, goes a leedle faster

dan my pall go through his het, den dare goes not so many Dexas beefs und hosses ober dot Rio Grande.

"Put, poyees, I shust pet somepody bays me fer dot pranty, und dot lugin'-class, er I gits so mat dot I shoves no more trinks, goot nor pad, ober dot par, ondil I gets mine money in mine hant!"

George was too important a person, it was very evident, in the estimation of the crowd, to admit of their contradicting his many absurd and extravagant assertions in regard to his alleged experience with Duke Dudley and the notorious Cortina, the Scourge of the Rio Grande.

The scouts, with Will Wild and Carlos, all wrapped themselves in blankets, and slept the sleep of exhaustion on the parlor floor of Casa Garcia; stationing the ranger at the doorway as a guard, although no danger was now apprehended, either from bandit or red-man.

It was the hour of midnight. All, up to this time, had been quiet as the grave, about the house and grounds.

Soon, a warning yell from the ranger brought all five men to their feet, wide awake, in wonder and alarm.

Out at the door they rushed, just in time to witness a terrible sight. The peculiar clatter of hoofs, which, to the practiced ears of the scouts, betrayed the sounds as proceeding from an animal which was coming in a staggering lope, showing long and fatiguing exertion, was the first indication of the approach of any one; and none in the party had the remotest idea what madman could be approaching at such a time.

However, they were not to remain long in ignorance.

The animal, whatever it might be, sprung around the wall, and then in through the gateway, its wild eyes shining like balls of fire, and standing out in pain and terror.

The poor beast made a few mad and desperate plunges, and then, with a groan that sounded almost human, it fell outstretched upon the earth, directly in front of the wondering men, the blood spurting in a perfect stream from its mouth and nostrils.

Ejaculations of amazed horror broke from the observers as well they might; for, before their eyes, revealed by the bright moonlight, was the blood-stained form of Duke Dudley, still fast bound to the back of the dying horse.

Will Wild became instantly as sick as death, at the horribly disgusting sight of the work which his own hand had wrought, and most deeply he regretted that his mad passion had caused him to carry out his revenge in such a fearful and barbarous manner, and especially upon one who was, with all his faults and crimes, the son of the man who had been a father to him from his earliest recollection.

"Yer needn't be 'tall sot back, Will, by this job what yer done," said Old Rocky, encouragingly. "Hit warn't half bad enough, thet air all what kin be said 'bout hit. Yer orter 'a' cut his head off, 'stead o' his ears. Only jist b'ar in mind thet he'd 'a' ruined ther pore leetle gal's life ef yer hedn't struck his 'locate when yer did in ther gully"—all this Will Wild had explained to Carlos and the scouts—"Ya-as, hit air jist what I tell yer."

"He'd 'a' worried ther Angel inter her death afore another sun-up, sure an' sartin! I'm agittin' mighty r'iley an' I hev a strong appertite fer slash ther leetle life what he's gut lef' outen his no-count or'nary carkiss! Thet's jist how ther ole man feels."

"Yer done a big job, Will," said Jack, "an' ther Vigilantes'll finish his biz soon es they gits wind o' his bein' hyer. I wouldn't g'in a shuck cigarette fer his chance o' breathin' West Texas air arter sun-up."

"I'm cl'ar o' ther opine thet we'd better h'ist him up a limb ourselves," put in Tom Clark.

The latter had meanwhile been engaged in cutting Duke loose from his now dead horse. The young planter was, indeed, a most fearful sight to look upon, the wounds where his ears had been cut off having bled freely, as had also the cut in his shoulder.

"Gentlemen," said Will Wild, in a sad voice, "let me tell you. I came to this section of the country to claim my rights—fortune, station, and name—enjoyed since childhood by the man who now lies before you, although he has been ignorant that I was the rightful owner of the estates and name which he had been reared to believe were his own."

"Had he been an honest man, a gentleman, I should have shared everything with him, his father having, with the aid of a slave of my father, exchanged him for myself when we both were infants."

"The deed was done in the way of revenge upon my father, who had won the fortune of his neighbor, and afterward wounded him in a duel. But he always treated me as a son, and I loved him as a father; believing that he was such in reality until very recently. Therefore, as the father of this man reared and loved me, I do not and cannot wish him, bad as he is, to meet an ignominious death by the rope."

"Let him live! It may be possible that he will reform, after the terrible experience through which he has passed. What have you to say, my friends?"

"We-uns hain't gut no use fer men without ears in West Texas," asserted Jack; "but I reckon ef anybody hes gut a right ter hev a say so 'bout ther futur' o' ther triffin' cuss hit air you, Will Wild."

"My name is Will Wildom," was the reply. "I dropped part of it for the purpose of carrying out my plans with more security in regard to Duke Dudley."

"Tom, help me, will you, to the river-bank with the miserable man? If he has any life left let him have a chance to live and do better. What say you, Old Rocky and Jack? Are you both willing?"

"I ain't a-buckin' ag'in' yer, Will, in this er in any thing else what yer hes sot yer heart on; but I'm afeard thet yer'll be right sorry, 'fore another moon, thet his breath warn't choked outen his or'nary carkiss."

"I'm a thinkin' jist es ole pard puts hit," said Jack Hodge; "but hev yer way 'bout hit, Will. Only h'ist ther cuss outen my sight, er I'll git so or'mighty-full o' mad thet I'll want ter hash him, an' his boss, tew, inter catfish bait!"

Without any more words Will, with the assistance of Tom Clark, bore Duke Dudley down to the river-bank, and laid his mutilated form upon a mossy bank.

They then returned to the casa without speaking, each being busy with his own thoughts.

Those of Will Wild were of the man who had been a father to him, in every sense of the word, but whose blood flowed in the veins of the wretched man whom he had just borne to the bank of the river.

It seemed, indeed, impossible that such a villain could be the son of a man like Colonel Wildom.

Tom was speculating on the probable crimes that Duke would commit, did he recover and be allowed to go free; for he believed in his soul that the young planter would be, if anything, more desperate and dangerous to society in the days to come.

When the two men joined Old Rocky, Jack, and Carlos, Will excused himself for a moment, and, going to the ranger who had been on guard, slipped a gold eagle into his hand, requesting him to go and bathe Duke Dudley, and to remove the signs of the *duello*, and the terrible ride that had followed it, as far as was possible. He gave him also a flask of brandy, that the miserable wretch might not be without the stimulant which he was sure to crave so madly, and of which he now stood so much in need.

Will then secured the services of the surgeon, to dress and apply proper ointments to the wounds of the planter, and then joined the scouts and Carlos in the parlor; relating, in brief, at their request, the strange circumstances which had been the occasion of the changing of the infants, the relations existing between the families of Wildom and Dudley in the past, and also the general history of both families as it had been told him by the man who had been as a father to him.

All were greatly impressed by what he narrated, and they congratulated Will upon the prospect of his being at last in a position to regain and enjoy his own, without being troubled by a suit at law. For, not one of them thought that Duke Dudley would remain in Texas, or again visit the ranch or plantation; although no proofs or testimony had been submitted to him, to prove that he was not the son of Major Dudley.

After a few questions from one and another of the interested listeners, they all once more sunk back on their blankets, to seek the repose so much needed.

The night passed without any further interruption.

Quiet, at last, reigned in the grounds of Casa Garcia.

Will Wildom, upon awaking in the morning, proceeded at once to the river bank, to ascertain the condition of the wounded man whom he had placed there.

The blanket, which the ranger had spread over his unconscious charge, lay upon the bank; but Duke Dudley was gone—no trace of the once dreaded desperado was anywhere to be seen!

CHAPTER XXVII.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

WILL WILDOM remained for some time at Casa Garcia, at the earnest solicitation of Carlos, seconded by the beautiful Celesta, the wishes of whom were not to be disregarded under any circumstances.

Especially were they to be considered of importance, during the period of her recovery from the shock occasioned by the terrible and prostrating experiences of that most eventful evening and night, and of the day that had followed them.

It is perhaps useless to say, after having recorded the feelings that ruled the heart of the young man at first sight of the lovely Castilian, that he left Casa Garcia, with but two objects in view—objects which, if not accomplished, the world would henceforth be dark to him indeed.

The first was, to establish, and prove his

claim to the estates of the late Major David Dudley; and the second, to ask Carlos Garcia to deliver up the fair Celesta to his keeping, as his most cherished treasure, and devotedly loved wife.

He did not think of asking this most important favor of Carlos, until he was on an equal footing, as far as regarded family—as he knew the decision of the courts would place him—and ten times more wealthy than the Garcias.

Will had no fears, as to the answer of Celesta; for he had basked in the witching love-light of her limpid eyes for weeks, and he felt assured, by a thousand and one proofs, by tell-tale words and glances, that the fair Castilian maiden loved him most truly and devotedly.

Having first received the information from her brother, Celesta requested Will to explain everything in regard to his discovering her—as she was being borne away by Duke Dudley; the chase over the plain that followed; and then the *duello* in the wash-out on the bank of the Rio Medina.

This the young man did in a modest manner, and the impulsive girl clasped his hand, whispering her grateful thanks, and expressing them in glances which spoke them still more forcibly.

During the stay of Will at the Casa Garcia, Old Rocky, Jack Hodge, Tom Clark, and Carlos accompanied him to the Medina, where he guided them to the gully into which he had dashed, and where he had fought Duke Dudley, after tearing the fair Celesta from the miscreant's arms.

The signs of the conflict were still visible, as well as the trail of the Indians. This was followed to the point where Will and Celesta had been released from their terrible position; but the Comanches that had been slain were nowhere to be seen. The six bodies had been removed by the war party, as had been expected. Nothing further remaining to be seen or done in that direction, our friends returned to the casa.

Tom Clark found himself ordered back to join his command—Donaldson's Rangers—on the Rio Grande, as Cortina, after his late disastrous raid, had swept the American side of the river, from Rio Grande City to Reynosa, burning ranches, and driving thousands of horses and cattle across the river to Mexico, besides shooting many of the rancheros on this trail of rapine, murder, and revenge.

Old Rocky and Jack Hodge were prevailed upon to remain for a brief space at Casa Garcia, and guard the inmates; while Carlos, at the earnest request of Will Wild, accompanied the latter to the State capital, stopping on the way at the Dudley ranch on the Guadalupe, for news of its former occupant, the young planter.

They were informed by the manager of the ranch that Duke Dudley had put in an appearance a short time after he had disappeared from the river-side, where Will and Tom had carried him.

He said little, so they were told, to any one; but had demanded all the money that was on hand, and had also made a sale of several hundred head of beeves to a neighboring ranchero.

The news of his outrageous conduct and recent crimes had not yet reached these people, so no curiosity in regard to his movements had been felt or expressed. It was only after Duke had left, taking with him the proceeds of this extensive sale, for—so he condescended to say—the plantation on the Colorado, that the news from San Antonio found its way to the ranch on the Guadalupe.

Duke Dudley had arrived in the night, and had kept himself in his own apartment during the entire day that he remained. Every one noticed that his head was bound up; but, as he showed signs of having drank very heavily, this was not thought strange, and therefore was not commented upon by any one. In fact, it was not unusual; he having frequently fallen from his horse when intoxicated, and bruised himself severely.

At the plantation on the Colorado, Will and Carlos halted also. Here they were told substantially the same story.

In this instance, however, it was the proceeds of the cotton crop—a very large amount—Duke having instructed his manager to sell to a broker, previous to his starting for San Antonio, on the trip that proved his ruin.

All the inquiries that they made regarding his present probable whereabouts were in vain.

Nothing could be ascertained, even in the way of conjecture, as to where he was at the time that Carlos and Will arrived; for he had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as he had come, and no one at the plantation knew, or seemed to care whither. Further search for Duke Dudley, it clearly appeared, was for the present useless.

But the business of Will Wildom led him to Austin; and it was of a nature that must be attended to, whether Dudley were living or dead.

Through the testimony of the body servant of Colonel William Wildom, and that of the old negro nurse, Carlos and Will journeying to—

gether to Kentucky to collect evidence; these, together with the carefully prepared sworn statement of Colonel Wildom, made in anticipation of death, and also letters which had been written by the wife of Major David Dudley to friends—letters in which Mrs. Dudley spoke of the peculiar mark on the foot of her infant son, it having evidently been unknown to the father of the child, with whom, indeed, she did not live on the most amicable terms—through these proofs the claim of our friend Will to the name and estate of Dudley was at length fully established.

Then, by an Act of the Legislature, he was permitted to retain the name by which he had always been known, and which he felt most reluctant to exchange for another; least of all, for that which Duke Dudley had borne only to disgrace.

So Will Wildom continued to be called by the appellation of the man who had so fondly loved him, and whose memory he cherished—the only father whom he had ever known.

But the most astounding revelation was yet to come. It was one that caused the greatest surprise to Will, as to others; but, in his case, it brought with it the greatest relief and delight.

It was a later confession of the two negroes, to the effect that they had once more changed the infants; this time, unknown to any but themselves.

That the young man known as Duke Dudley was not the son of Colonel Wildom but of a worthless white man who had detected the negro in carrying the child of Major Dudley to Wildom's and returning immediately with the other infant.

This was in the night. The affair had a suspicious look to the man, and he resolved to make what he could out of the circumstance.

Getting the body servant of Colonel Wildom out on a hunt, he then frightened the negro by telling him what he had witnessed. The terror-stricken servants then acknowledged what they had done, and the result was that the man compelled them, under fearful threats of exposure and death if they refused, to make still another exchange.

This time it consisted in exchanging the child of this unprincipled vagabond for that of Colonel Wildom.

Consequently the son of a poor, shiftless drunkard was reared in affluence as Duke Dudley, the heir of the wealthy major, and the real son of Colonel Wildom, a bright, handsome boy, was adopted by a planter in comfortable circumstances at the death of the man who had caused this second exchange to be made.

The latter never profited by his villainy as he had intended, by forcing Duke Dudley, when a babe of age, to furnish him with money at under penalty of having their relationship made known.

So rejoiced was Will Wildom at what the negro now told him that he rewarded him richly, a pleasant surprise to the old darky, who had felt that he was running the risk of being severely punished by making this second secret known.

Will then visited the real son of Colonel Wildom, revealing the knowledge of the whole affair which had thus come to him; and surprising the young man, by requesting him to take the name of Harry Wildom, and with it, a large tract of land and a considerable sum of money, with which to start in life. He, promising himself, at the same time that he would be a brother to the son of the man who had been a father to him.

The planter who had adopted and reared this youth, calling him by the name of James Martin, was overjoyed at this proposition; and the consequence was that the new name was speedily taken possession of, and with it the handsome fortune which Will Wildom so freely bestowed upon him.

The strangest part of the affair, however, was that Harry Wildom, formerly known as Jim Martin, was engaged to be married to one of the daughters of the sister of Major Dudley, who, at the death of her brother, had been left in poverty, and whom Will had assisted, previous to leaving for Texas.

And while Carlos and Will accompanied Harry to the residence of the Stanleys—that being the name of the man whom Major Dudley's sister had married—and all the strange story was told; Mrs. Stanley, knowing through Harry that Will Wildom had established his claim to the Dudley estate, and was in reality her nephew, could not sufficiently express her gratification.

Great was the rejoicing for several days; this visit proving a most pleasant and momentous one to Carlos Garcia, who fell madly in love with Stella Stanley, the second daughter in the amiable widow's household, a lively and attractive maiden of some sixteen summers. The sentiment soon proved to be mutual, much to the joy of Will Wildom, and all others who felt interested.

But, kind reader, our tale is almost told. We would not willingly draw another dark thread through the web, which has grown finer in texture, and brighter in hue, as the task of the weaver has neared completion.

Suffice it to say, in regard to those whom we have learned to respect and love, that one balmy evening, scarce three months after Will and Carlos had returned from Kentucky, Casa Garcia and the gardens surrounding it were one blaze of light; as was also the roof of the building, from which a band discoursed sweet music.

The meaning of all this was, that a grand wedding was to be celebrated, to which all the elite of San Antonio were invited.

But we do not propose here to enter into details.

We have neither the time nor the space for a description of the gorgeous affair. We wish merely to record that those who were united in the bonds of wedlock, on this auspicious occasion, were:

William Wildom and Celesta Garcia,
Harry Wildom and Maude Stanley, and
Carlos Garcia and Stella Stanley.

Old Rocky stood, as Jack Hodge afterward said, "stiff as a half-foundered stage boss," twisting his old sombrero out of all shape, while the widow Stanley, who had been, as in duty bound, matronizing the affair throughout, spoke to the old scout in a pleasant tone, regarding some of the stirring events in his career. Jack quietly made his way toward this pair, whispering to Old Rocky:

"I reckon we'd better hev one [more couple] hitched, jist ter make this an even game."

This was the feather that broke the camel's back, for the old scout had been in torture all the time that the widow had been near him, all the time fearing that Jack would discover the predicament in which he was. So, when Hodge did speak, using words that were more torturing to Old Rocky than the flashing arrows of the red-men, the latter rushed wildly out of the door and toward the river, Jack following him and calling out in a feminine voice:

"Come back to me, my darling!"

Old Rocky dared not so much as look back. The blood seemed already congealing in his veins, for he fully believed the widow to be in pursuit of him.

With one wild, mad bound, the old scout went splashing into the river, half-swimming and half-wading to the opposite bank, where he plunged into the dark undergrowth, muttering:

"Dog-gone my great grandmother's uncle's step-darter's snuff-box! I wish't I war t'other side ther Rockies. Dog'd ef I wouldn't stay thar!"

While Jack rolled on the sward on the opposite bank, convulsed with insane laughter, such as the old scout had never heard before, and which he thought must proceed from the disappointed widow Stanley.

This conviction caused him to dash on still further, and crawl into a thicket, where, after much search, Jack found him.

The latter then explained the joke, and succeeded in persuading him to return to the happy principals of the wedding and their anxious guests, all of whom had the highest regard for him. But no sooner did old Rocky again see the widow Stanley looming up in the assemblage, than he loomed down, stating his intention to "skute out fer a leetle perrarer air."

But, with the exception of the old scout's very genuine fright at the supposed charge of a dreaded "kaliker-kivered human," all went along smoothly, as such ceremonies should, and nothing occurred to mar the festivities that followed.

The reader can rest assured, that those who were united upon this occasion, were well-suited to each other, and were as joyous and happy as we could reasonably hope or expect.

We leave them thus, without further comment, confessing frankly that we are not accustomed to "holding three pairs at a time," and consequently, and very prudently, to avoid embarrassment on our part—but principally to avoid taxing the patience of the reader, we throw up our cards.

Count us out, therefore, until next deal; and then, perhaps, the hands will show whether the future career of the young planter, after his deserved disgrace, and crowning criminal deeds at Casa Garcia and vicinity, gave Will Wildom cause to regret that he had spared the miserable life of the man who had been known as Duke Dudley, and whom he himself had believed to be the legitimate son of one who had been a father to himself—Colonel William Wildom.

THE END.

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